

MY OLD MAID'S CORNER

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MY OLD MAID'S
CORNER



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I

SOME VERY PARTICULAR OLD MAIDS

THE sun has never deserted my corner to-day. Early this morning it came in through my eastern windows, and then before I had time to miss its warmth in that direction it was a

blaze of glory through my southern panes. It has kept my brasses agleam and set my birds singing. As it stole a way around my room and reached a favorite shelf, I saw it linger for an hour or more over the titles of certain volumes, as it always does when a morning is fine, like a real book-lover, to whom even titles mean something.

On days like this, when the sun never fails me and I catch the blue of a cloudless sky through the plants that fill my sashes, I become convinced that no other place in the world can be quite so delightful as the particular corner in town which I occupy. I forget then that several stories below me to the left a noisy traffic in truck and trolley goes ceaselessly on above the cobbles, and that over the asphalt to the right coupés and carriages are incessantly rolling,

or that the wind has but to blow to defile the air with clouds of dust, assailing every passer-by and the very topmost of my neighbors' windows. I forget each and every one of these unpleasant things below me. The sky in its beauty seems so much nearer than the street.

Of course it is only an old maid's corner, this of mine. And there are those among the unfriendly who may say it is as well that I find it so charming, since it is all which, as a spinster, I am likely to possess. For every one knows that somehow or other, and in the very nature of things, old maids and corners belong to each other, and who is there to deny it?

These corners may take on different guises, be found here, then there, sometimes as places to which we are invited on occasion by a friend, some-

times as places specially reserved for us in the heart of another. Sometimes, again, there will be a corner, like this sunny one of mine, which we make for ourselves, to which on occasion we invite our sisters in the bond, or to which they will come of their own accord for a breath of what they call freedom—a freedom for which each one of them sighs (so each one of them says), but for which, as we old maids know as we listen, few of them would exchange the privileges and perquisites of their own more protected and prosperous estates. But whatever these places, are they ever anything else but corners, after all? Are they ever the centers of anything?

I have to confess, I am sorry to say, to a time when such facts were wont to fill me with dismay; when the mere suggestion of any place occupied by an old maid conveyed to me

only an idea of hopeless forlornity; when the habit was mine of comparing the nature of every corner occupied by a spinster, whoever she might be and wherever, with the charms of firesides belonging to the very humblest of the married ones, and invariably (as was inevitable) to the detriment of everything belonging to the spinsters. Even the little corner in life allotted to me, small as it was, seemed by comparison so empty that I thought only the help of some philosophy or religion would ever enable me to fill it. But then, in those days (the more folly mine) I was always looking into every corner. Suddenly, however, I discovered that corners worth anything were places to look out of, not into. Every aspect altered. I found that I could command an undreamed-of radius of vision, that I always had two sides to choose from, that two ways of

viewing the world were open to me. The wonder and importance and even the charm of corners grew upon me, and again (this time with a sense of satisfaction) I compared the nature of mine with the firesides of the most exalted of the married ones, only to learn that few of my sisters who were in the bond could boast so wide an outlook, even when these sisters occupied great centers of their own.

It took me some time to understand the reason for this, since I had always supposed the center of a place insured for those who stood in it a position from which they could command wider views than the rest of us, see farther, get the whole sweep of life spread out before them. But I had to learn that most of those who occupied centers, especially great centers of affection, concerned

themselves but little with general views, being for the most part on the lookout only for the things that they felt ought to come to them; and they felt that everything ought to come—love, deference, devotion, all the tributes of the home and heart. To me as a spinster it had seemed, on the other hand, that those who occupied centers of affection should be less concerned with what came to them as their due than with what went out from them as their obligation; that, like the sun itself, they should be centers of centrifugal forces, radiating, through the very fullness of their joy, light and gladness into other lives. To be, as they insist on being, at the centers of centripetal forces is like being at the centers of whirlwinds and whirlpools and eddies. But my sisters in the bond can hardly understand this. If

they did, would there be so many cyclones and tornadoes in the home, so many clearings of overcharged atmospheres?

Whenever I think about corners and those which so many old maids have filled as a blessing, I am always led to wonder why it is that history and tradition have done so little for the spinster except to make her absurd. Why has literature never enshrined her, I ask myself often—set her apart in a corner by herself, as poets and philanthropists and great world-saviors are set, where she can rest honored and revered, not as some special and unselfish sister, nor yet as a certain unmarried and devoted cousin, but simply and without equivocation as an old maid, an individual as necessary to the world and its progress as even the married ones? For

think of all the other people's children old maids have loved and reared; of all the homes in which they have been blessings; of all the marriages they have helped to bring about, and the husbands and wives their counsels have kept together. Think of these things, and then of how, when no longer needed, these old maids have been slipped away and forgotten, like the ashes of last year's fires.

Gibbon, to be sure, speaks in affectionate terms of an aunt who brought him up. But did her virtues ever inspire him to do justice to the class? And Mr. James Whitcomb Riley has written a poem about old Aunt Mary, verses that I never read without "a choke here in the throat." I have liked at times to fancy "Aunt Mary" an old maid, but I do not believe that she could

have been, and, what is worse, I have a suspicion that half of the charm of his lines would be lost had he told that she was. Yet sometime, if we ever meet, I mean to ask him.

On the other hand, from time immemorial, teachers and preachers, philosophers and prophets, besides a whole army of lesser people, hordes of little men and women, old and young, in Christian tongues and heathen, have gone on writing about parents and their offspring, until a special order of sentiments has been established, which envelops as with a halo every subject bearing in the remotest degree upon the maternal or paternal relation. The veriest platitude addressed to an imaginary mother or child will bring down the galleries at any time because of this, and a "my father" has only to be uttered in a certain tone to make

every hearer catch his breath. Centuries of cultivation have bred these responsive emotions in the bone. But what has any poet except Mr. Riley done for the aunt? And where is the philosopher who has even attempted to reconcile us to spinsters? Has a single sentiment ever been cultivated for their benefit? Fancy indeed the most sublime of apostrophes addressed to old maids! The gravest and sedatest of assemblies who listened would be dissolved on the instant into convulsions of laughter.

I have only to think of the adjectives and similes which have been contributed to the language on our account to grow sad and dejected. How wretched and mean and little they are, as if everything that was queer and unpleasant and narrow-minded and fussy and dreadful was embodied in the spinster alone, and

as if some grandmothers whom we know were not the most dreadful of old maids themselves!

“Every right-minded person,” as my old aunt used to say, “should resent this injustice.” I once knew a New England woman who did, and very nobly too, since she herself was married. But she had three sisters who were not—such dear, lovable, sweet-smiling, plain old maids of sisters, each one plainer than the other, if that were possible, yet each one lovelier, if anything, in character, and all three of them like gentle satellites revolving in tireless ministrations round the one man of the house—he whom the other sister had brought home to them as her husband.

No one had ever asked the hands of the three old-maid sisters in marriage, because when they grew up

there were never any young men in their neighborhood who could ask. The War for the Union had robbed New England of all her marriageable sons. But nothing had ever embittered the natures of these three spinsters; not even the fact of a certain physical unloveliness, which advancing years only served to accentuate: their narrow shoulders, their faded eyebrows, and their abnormal shortness of vision—an unloveliness which you forgot, however, within half an hour after knowing them, each one had so great “an inner beauty shining in her face,” a beauty of goodness that would have been breadth and valor and great largeness if it had ever had a chance. As it was, it was the goodness of gentleness only, as strength held consciously in control is always gentle. And neither did these gentle

old maids resent the ridicule with which spinsters were regarded in their day and in their particular neighborhood. The married sister alone resented it for them.

Once in her presence I called myself laughingly an old maid. I was twenty-five at the time, older, of course, by certainly half a century or more, than I am at present. For not even at eighty-nine, if you please, is an unmarried woman ever so old again as she was at twenty-five, nor so wise, nor so weary, nor so blasé. Youth comes to her again with age—youth which, alas! no one is likely to recognize in its coming but herself.

I remember how this married sister took both my hands in hers and how she looked into my face, begging me, with a seriousness which at the time I found more bewildering than

impressive, never again to let such an “ opprobrious epithet ” fall from my lips—never, if I loved or revered women ! And when I asked her why, repeating, with the thoughtless arrogance of youth, that I was an old maid myself, and *I* did not mind—when I asked her why, her face grew red with indignation as she told me how old maids were ridiculed by the men and women in her New England village, and how it hurt her when she thought of her three single sisters, those gentle souls, and all, she added, “ because they still bore their own instead of a man’s name.”

A man’s name ! I know now that that was the trouble, the reason for her speaking with such scorn, for she realized what a “ man’s name ” had done for her, and that without it she too would have been even as

her gentle and husbandless sisters whose champion she so wanted to be. And with this realization there came over her for a moment a fierce and sudden sensation of antagonism to the very idea of that power which her husband represented in her life, one of those sensations to which all of us are subject who recognize in crises the potency of some influence which we cannot resist even while we resent it, and which, as we have to confess, *does* bring into our lives certain elements of well-being, without which, for all our vainglory, we should have been as nothing. To this woman at such moments merely the idea of man as a stubborn and incontrovertible—though often, to the rest of us, it must be acknowledged, very pleasant and useful—fact in the order of creation became a grievous offense.

“Do you know any man living,” she went on with strained emphasis of tone, “who could have made my dear sisters sweeter and more precious than they are?” And again as she spoke the thought came to her of what she would have been without a husband, and again that sensation of antagonism swept over her, so strengthened that she forgot to make her usual distinctions between the gentle Theodore whom she had wedded and a—*man*.

It was easy to see this, for when he came into the room a moment later, followed by the three old-maid sisters, who, smiling in welcome, had waited for him at the front door, she, his wife, did not rise to kiss him as was her wont. From the chair in which she sat with folded arms, she asked him coldly but politely if his morning had been pleasant. He

never noticed the absence of her kiss, however, having other things on his mind, for his morning had been pleasant, full of flattering tributes to himself, of which he was eager to tell us. How he beamed as he talked to us—four spinsters and a wife all grouped about him! *He* had no theories about old maids. They helped to swell his audience at home.

And where in the world, by the way, will any man find more devout and attentive listeners than among the old maids?—the old maids I mean, of course, who are not opulent or distinguished on their own account. Opulent and distinguished old maids, as we all know, never listen. They expect to be listened to. And what a difference the expectation makes! I can now tell on the instant, and even when for the first time I hear a strange spinster

speak, whether the habit of her life has been to command attention or neglect. Her opening syllables betray her, her tones, her gestures, the very expression of her middle-aged eyelids. It is like watching a workman handling his tools or a juggler his balls. When he is a master his very preparations convince you, and you make yourself ready to receive impressions. When he bungles, you doubt.

Up my street—my street with the asphalt, it should go without saying, not that with the cobbles—there lives an old maid who dresses in sables and who drives every day in her brougham. I see her go by sometimes when I look out of my southern windows. She occupies the corner at the other end of the block—the corner which is not a corner at all, to my way of think-

ing, since both sides of it are alike, and both look out on fashion till she might as well be hemmed in and surrounded by a Chinese wall. I much prefer my own, therefore, to hers, since each side of mine means at least a way of escape from the other side. But though I prefer my own corner, I lose myself in envy and in admiration whenever this old maid in her sables begins to talk. There is such a sense of surety about her, of certainty, of an indefinable, indescribable, undeniable air of knowing that not a word that falls from her lips will be permitted to escape the approving deference of her friends. There is never the slightest hesitation for a word or a phrase, nor yet for the material out of which one of her high-sounding phrases may be coined. Why should there be, in fact? She is always sure of a mark

somewhere, never having missed one yet. No wonder that I envy her at times, realizing as I do what a weapon of defense her manner would be to any of us: what a sword to carve a fortune by it would prove in the hands of many a poor neglected old spinster whom I know, to whose earnest speech nobody in the world now pays the slightest attention.

Sometimes there comes on a visit to the corner of this old maid in her sables another old spinster who writes. Then I am invited in for a cup of tea on some windy afternoon when neither of them wants to drive. The old maid in her sables always introduces the spinster who writes as if she were introducing one to a piece of new furniture sent home on approval.

I find it very restful to be there,

for I am never expected to say a word. Indeed, the distinguished spinster who writes looks so bored when I speak that quite involuntarily I have learned to take the attitude of that part of an audience which is always waiting to applaud. Certainly I am entertained. This distinguished spinster who writes spares no effort in my presence. As she feels my attention increasing, it is most gratifying to watch her sitting before me with blinking eyes, turning her sentences over and over so as to bring them out in still more enchanting form, and all for my benefit. I feel so sure of that.

No consciousness of other *bons mots* having gone hopelessly astray or of having been taken without credit ever hampers the speech of this distinguished spinster who writes. She makes the very least of

her sallies with the serenity of the successful actor whose most trivial asides are rapturously received, and for whom the rest of the company gives way when he speaks. And how full of the modulations of a gratified sense the tones of her voice become when the words have been arranged at last to her liking! There is just the merest suggestion in her manner of an almost infantile surprise, as if it had been quite by accident, after all. Without waiting for me to ask her, she will be at pains to repeat her words so as to give me again the delight of them, her face glowing with the pleasure of my homage. Yet she never looks at me except to bring my wandering gaze back to her. The mystery is to know how she has caught the feeling of my close attention.

I used to wonder why she took

such pains for me, and then I discovered that it must be worth while, since she knew that what she was saying to-day would be remembered to-morrow and quoted next day and then laid aside among the annals of the household, to be brought out again with other family treasures and exhibited on the arrival of strangers and visitors of note.

When I turn away from that corner and come back to my own, I say to myself that I do not believe that these two women are old maids at all—they seem so wedded to a sense of their own importance.

The good listeners, on the other hand, are the old maids to whose speech nobody pays any attention, yet to whom everybody talks. And I wonder, considering how many confidences men have poured into their ears, and how many other things men

have found to say about them, that not a gentleman has yet been found good and generous enough to pay tribute to this surpassing excellence in spinsters—an excellence so dear to the masculine mind. How many old-maid aunts, indeed, have nephews not beguiled? How many old-maid sisters have not opened their ears to the self-praise of their unsuccessful brothers who have missed a hearing at the bar, or in the pulpit, or wherever there was competition among men?

Patient souls, these old maids, listening to each of us as a mother only listens to her own, and who have listened so long that at last they have the air of never expecting any one to pay attention to them. They venture into speech on their own account, as timid mice into parlors, ready on the instant to whisk about

and seek cover again. These, though, are the old maids for whom corners are never lacking, so eager are the very least among men to assure themselves of a hearing somewhere.

I am so sorry for the old maids who have never yet found their proper corners, and I know so many. They belong nowhere, are no man's possession, like fruit dropped over a sunny garden wall and on to the highway beyond. Every passer-by has a right to them, and may devour them as he travels; but they are never reckoned again among the proprietor's belongings, nor taken to adorn a table round which his guests are gathered. I never look at a family tree without thinking of just such old maids, wondering who nipped the bud that I see on the end of some ancestral branch bearing no divergent twigs, and with which a hereditary line is ended.

These old maids are to be found everywhere. They come to sew for you, to make over pillows, to read to you, to teach you a language, or to instruct you on the pianoforte. Or they make lamp-shades, which you buy out of charity, or children's games, for which you purchase the materials. But you never go into their houses nor ask them especially into yours, pathetic figures that they are, whose only joy seems to be the remembrance of a brightness that had been when their fathers were alive. And how dazzling the brightness grows as it recedes, until at the last it includes their whole horizon!

But then, no old maid can have a corner who sighs for the things that are gone. A corner, it seems to me, must be a present brightness, not a glory that has been. The sun should shine into it by day and the stars by night. Friends should come and go,

—rich and poor, old and young, the miserable and the happy,—else there is no corner at all, only a nook in which one is sheltered without sheltering. And if fashion can travel on one side of this corner and industry on the other, so much the better, for then the old maid gets the graces and the virtues combined, and there is no better combination, nor one more helpful.

Of course our married brothers, being men, will all look at our corners from different points of view, but we old maids need never be disturbed if we remember that a man's point of view has really almost nothing to do with the thing at which he is looking, especially when that thing has anything to do with a woman. See how long they have been regarding us, and is there one who understands us yet—one who

does not picture us as a blessing or a temptation, and all according to what he has in himself, not what he finds in us? That which a man will see in our corners will, therefore, never depend upon the side he takes, but upon another and altogether different side of which he is thinking, or was thinking yesterday, or of which he means to think to-morrow. I know this, because sometimes one of these men will come to my corner parlor, and after glancing about he will tell me how delightful it is to find life so simplified. Simplified! As if he and every other married man I know were not reveling in complexities! And sometimes a married brother, who has been very comfortable for half an hour in the only large chair that I possess, will look across at me where I sit on a stool much too small for me, and he will

tell me that, after all, I seem to have everything that I could possibly want in this world.

Once, before I had even that stool, and when my corner was new, he came to inspect. Married brothers, as I say, will always do that. I had taken a cushion and seated myself on the floor, my back to the chimney, and because I was cheerful about it, trying not to spoil his visit,—not to make him too conscious of his occupying my only chair,—he said, “I don’t know but that you are the kind of woman, after all, who would be just as well off without chairs!” And this is the brother who is always tucking cushions into his wife’s back, and wheeling comfortable seats into place for her.

Marriage, indeed, does make a difference to women, and we who are the old maids might just as well

learn. My own first awakening came when I saw my married sisters calling to their stalwart young husbands to help them over some puddles in the road. And what a fuss they made! When they had been helped over, they went on and left me, the youngest, behind. I called for assistance too, it seemed so agreeable to command it. One of my sisters, her hand still in that of her husband, looked back and said: "It's easy. Step on a stone and jump." Then cuddling closer to her husband, she walked on, not turning again.

I can remember, too, the wife of some college professor who had been asked to meet me when I was perhaps twenty-eight. "Why, I thought you were married," she said to me as we shook hands. "If I had known you were single, I never

would have worn a long dress." It was her only long dress, I learned afterward,—that was why she said "a" and not "my,"—a black silk dress, by the way, which she had worn for years, and which she made "low neck" for dinner-parties by unfastening the few top buttons. These early experiences, and my having married sisters, taught me much. Probably every other old maid has learned, too, that timidity and helplessness, for instance, so engaging in wives, are considered ridiculous in spinsters. Is not a timid old maid laughed at the world over, and is not a timid wife cherished?

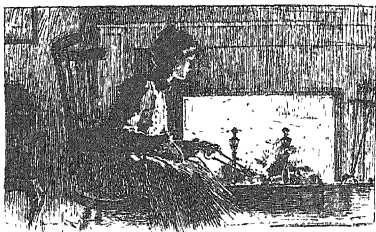
I compared notes on the subject of our condition only the other day with another old maid of my acquaintance (not of the opulent or distinguished kind), who comes here

for the purpose. I dwelt upon the distinctions made against us, especially upon the fact that in the great processions we had no appointed places: that we were always left out of things.

“Oh, but we do have our places,” she said. “We always come in with the buggies at the end of country funerals.”


We both laughed.

But then, each of us had a corner.



II

A WINTER NIGHT

NE of the worst of our winter storms is raging. No one will be here to-night. My eastern windows shake against the blast, and their panes run with streams of melting flakes, while the woodwork of their sashes is piled inch-deep with snow. The houses across the street are half-

hidden by the driving storm. I get only in suggestion and as a mass the line of the roofs, capped with their ugly water-tanks and their chimneys. Below this line are the lighted windows. I know them to be windows, although I can distinguish nothing through the falling snow but oblong surfaces of white or yellow, according to the color of the window-shades, all set in walls of blackness. Below these, again, I see, but more distinctly, the big uncurtained windows of the little shops—those of the plumber, of the fruit-dealer, and of the man who makes on an upper floor the antique furniture which he sells below. Streaks of yellow gas-light edge a way through these frosted panes, and fall on bent and muffled figures driving their open umbrellas straight into the very face of the

biting storm, and again on the owners of the shops at work with shovels before their doors.

In the middle of the street the cars make their way with a ceaseless clanging of bells. Then the snow-plow, filled with men and brooms, comes behind, puffing, noisy, bustling, and invincible. It cuts a way through the drifts, and tosses the fresh-fallen snow from side to side, leaving a clean-swept track. It will be an ugly streak of muddy brown to-morrow when the traffic of the day has begun to defile it, like that which civilization, following the pioneer path, makes through a forest—civilization that leaves in its wake so much that is ugly and defiled.

When I look out of my southern windows the scene changes. No wind strikes here. That is the advantage

of a corner. Storms may beat on one window, but quiet is sure to look in at the other. You have only to stand still and look both ways, or the other way, when trouble comes.

I have opened one of these southern windows so that I may lean my elbows on the sash, as I love to do, and fill my lungs. At no other time, except when some heavy rain has washed all the dust out of the air, is the atmosphere of a city ever so fresh as when snow is falling. It comes in to-night like a brisk and energetic friend who thinks that the pleasures of our firesides have begun to enervate our senses, and who bustles about among our possessions, urging us to be up and out among the miseries.

I can feel the cold air rush by my cheeks and dart away into every corner of my room. It stirs my fire;

the smell of burning hickory comes to me, puffed, I know, in an angry protest against the invading presence. But I do not turn my head. Vigorous outside influences are good for us all at times. At least, I have a friend who always tells me so. She comes into my room with just the manner of the snowy air to-night, driving all repose before her. She wants nothing quite as she finds it, even the atmosphere; but her presence usually changes *that*.

It gives me a strange sensation to stand here by this open window during such a storm, a few stray snowflakes deflected from their course and falling about my head. Now I can feel the air of my room, full of its soft warmth and its conviction of comfort, pass by me on its way into the stormy night, while the winter air rushes in—two currents passing

and repassing, like spirit flames in eternal blendings and interblendings that make for growth and purity. First I catch, as it steals out and into the cold, the perfume of a rose that stands on a table; then the fragrance of mignonette; and again, though fainter than at first, the delicate acrid aroma of hickory logs; and, quite distinct from any of these, something subtle and indefinable which only book-lovers would recognize—a faint suggestion, brought out by the warmth, of many volumes in leather that have stood for years on their respective shelves.

Across the street from this southern window of mine there are no shops or business places, if I except the small room of a school-teacher, and another small room occupied by a dressmaker, and a house farther on where a widow and her daughters

take in boarders. You will find women like these everywhere in a great city—lone creatures stranded on the highway of life, with tents pitched where they fall, since they are never able again to catch up with the procession of the married ones. My more prosperous neighbors are all on my side of the street. I look out of their windows sometimes, but not into them—up at them now and then when a child raps on a pane as I pass. Before their doors to-night I hear the ceaseless scrape of the snow-shovel. Snow never brings silence in a great city. The snow-shoveler announces it with his incessant scrape on the pavement long before you are awake, and you can tell without lifting your head from your pillow that winter has come and that the ground is white. The shout of the milkman to his

horses forcing a way through the drifts at dawn, without the sound of his wheels on the cobble-stones, will also convince you of this.

These southern windows of mine interest me only as they serve to bring the sun into my room or as they give me a chance to look down toward the apothecary's shop on the corner below. I get all my weather reports in this way, from the red and green lights of his windows reflected in the wet of the pavement. If there is the least suspicion of dampness on a paving-block, these vigilant green and red lights are after it at once; and if there are puddles, or the rain is falling, they take up their station by every pool, and signal to me on the instant, so that I know without further question whether both umbrella and overshoes are necessary. I can see, too, from my

southern windows the undertaker's shop, with his gas-jets always burning through the night,—the saddest beacon-lights I know,—never extinguished even after every other window except the apothecary's is dark on their side of the street, and I can tell that ten o'clock has struck and all honest workmen are sound asleep.

In the houses that directly face these southern windows there is never any life to be seen. It is all indoors, as is proper, behind curtains conventionally draped. Even in summer the front steps are deserted, for when summer begins these of my neighbors are all away. It is on the other side of my corner, there to the east, where the wind and the snow beat so fiercely against the panes, and where the struggle for existence is a different one, that I

get the life of the people who dwell there. It is all in evidence on the sidewalks when the season begins. The daily toiler knows few reserves.

How good a fire is on such a night! When I have shut out the cold and the falling flakes once more, and drawn a chair close to my fender, I throw on some extra logs,—so soon do we all want to recover from influences that are too brisk and energetic,—and I give myself up to the pleasure of an increasing warmth, which gradually brings out again the sweet perfume of the rose and the mignonette. But as I sit here, tongs in hand, tapping my logs, I realize that there is one thing which, as an old maid, I must always miss with my fire—some other fire-lover to dispute with me any liberty I may choose to take with it. I have everything my own way,—the more

sorrow mine!—shovel and tongs, kindling-wood and paper. But I can remember how every fire that was lighted at home—and they were lighted every day and several times—was always made a subject of discussion between my mother and her son-in-law. Both thought themselves authorities, but my mother boasted traditions. They came from a time long before coal was much used in our houses and before the abominations of steam-radiators had begun. She used to insist on a deep bed of ashes; and no hearth in her day, for all the brightness of its appointments, was emptied every morning, made spick-and-span for a new beginning, like fireplaces in our city drawing-rooms—even the soot washed away, until the whole chimneypiece looks like one in a museum, with all of its records closed.

Her fireplace, with its bed of ashes and its backlog always standing ready, was like an open chronicle in which the history of each day could be read—a living history, never without an entry marking some happy household memory. To rob this bed of ashes of a single shovelful was as difficult as robbing a Kimberley diamond-mine. No one escaped her vigilant eye.

In these ashes she always had some embers of the night before concealed, hidden away there for lighting new fires. All you had to do was to scrape away the ashes and bring out the embers with your tongs. That was why she always insisted—as her grandmother and great-great-grandmothers had all done before her—that at most only three sticks of kindling-wood were necessary, placed in front of a back-

I was fussy and set in my ways. He told me so laughingly. How could I explain after that that what I wanted was the delight of some such argument as I remembered? Perhaps old maids *are* queer. We want so many things. But how empty and without savor the whole question of fire-building became after that—like the pleasantries of some one making his jokes to order! I have submitted since then to seeing my cleaning-woman carry scuttlefuls of ashes away without my venturing a protest. I even ring for my maid when that same man comes and my fire needs replenishing, although in my heart I believe that he has missed something by it. There can be no poetry about a fire-side, it seems to me, in which all the labor about it is left to one's servants and no one has the privilege of

tossing on an extra log when he wills. I mean, of course, a fireside where hickory is used and "the flapping of a flame" means something more than merely the heating of one's room when the wind is sharp. But being nothing but an old maid, what can I do?

Nobody associates fires with spinsters in any pleasant way. I have often wondered at it—wondered why it was that to sit before a blaze and dream has been by a common consent pictured as the privilege of very young girls who, chin in hand, rest there, or as the privilege of bachelors building castles that are one day to shelter the lady whom they love. When a woman is past twenty she is always represented, when before a fire, with a baby on her lap, or as an old grandmother thinking of the babies that have been but

who now hold children of their own before other and brighter fires far away. Or she is some very, very old grandmother of the fairy-tale crooning over her embers. When an old maid is pictured by a hearth, she is made a witch dreaming, not of love or of children, but of mischief! Love and children, it would appear, are not seemly subjects for old maids to dream of over fires. Yet I ask myself, "Why not?" since of all things else in the world they are the most beautiful. Still, even as I question, I realize that I would not speak of them as abstractions to that young girl who lies sleeping there in my spare chamber, dreaming of her own lover, whom she is to marry within a few weeks. She would think me "queer," as if at my age I should not be thinking of such things. And yet I wonder if

a woman has really ever done with thinking of them, and if she is ever as nice when she has.

I remember an old maid—a very, very old maid, so prim and correct and withered—with whom I would not have dared to broach any subject more vital than chrysanthemums. She lived in a New England town, and carried to her eighty-first year an air of almost girlish shyness. But when she was eighty her mind went, and then, for the first time, we all knew what the hidden thought of her long-sequestered life had been. For she bought a cradle, and ordered made some little fine dresses and petticoats and caps, and a basket in which all the pins and sweet powders and soft white flannels are kept; and so sat ready and waiting for that which was never to come, poor soul, and about

which she would rather have died than speak, had her mind retained its vigor.

I do not know why I think of her on such a wild, tempestuous night—that poor old maid long since gathered to her fathers, with all her fruitless hopes and gentle ways; for she never knew a storm in her life. The calm of the well-ordered and the correct surrounded her all her days and dried her up at last. I doubt whether she ever whispered to herself the deep-seated longing she betrayed to all the world when second childhood came. Yet why should any one have laughed or she have been ashamed to have let us know that that which she had wanted all her days was nothing less worthy than a crown? Is it so funny, then, to have starved affections, and is it not worse to have

had none? We old maids hide our hearts until they are built all over with crusts of tradition and prejudice, and of false ways of looking at natural things, and of fears of our neighbors' opinions. But when all the crusts covering mine are broken through, until only that which is the real in me is laid bare, I shall be glad if the desire God finds there be worthy to rank with that of this old maid of eighty, arranging those soft white flannels and little caps.

That young girl who lies asleep there in my spare chamber would open her eyes wide with something close akin to horror were I to tell her this story, which I never will. She would have to be older and understand more. Now, as it is, being young and in love, she is privileged to feel that every flutter in her

little heart is her individual possession, direct from the source of all that is holy and undefiled, where it has been hidden from the rest of us until the beauty and wonder of it, the majesty, the mystery, and all the glory of it, were for the first time revealed to her. No suggestion must be made in her presence of a universal pulse beating now in her veins as it has throbbed in others'. And who is there who would enlighten her? Not I, certainly. The fountains of the eternally virginal spring in every human heart, and keep the world of new emotions perennially fresh and beautiful; and to each of us is given the right not only to possess them but the obligation to cherish them. Yet in love, as in all things else, there is a universal and there is an individual; but it is the privilege of the young

not to know it. So I would not open any door for my little friend. Hers is the right to open them all for herself, the hand of her lover close pressing hers. But when they *are* opened, it will be to read other hearts better, not her own alone.

I wish that I might have had such a daughter as the one in that room—tall and *svelte* (I like that word): a long-stemmed rose, some one described her. My pleasure would have been to see her grow; beauty after beauty develop; always a fresh surprise coming from I did not know where, unless, as I believe at times, angels drop new beauties into certain souls. We are apt to believe, we older ones, that we have sown all the seeds of excellence which we see growing in the young. The tares and the weeds are other affairs, however, for which we can never account

unless they sprang from some branch on the other side of the family. But such a daughter as this one could have done so much for me: kept me, as I grew older, from queer ways—all those tricks of speech and manner of which I have such horror; and from narrow-minded views and prejudices that grow so upon us old maids who relax for an instant our vigilance with advancing years. The counsels of the young are good for us when middle age begins. If we heed them we spinsters need never be dethroned. That is why I like to listen to young people's suggestions. I want to guard against habits that may repel them or bring me to the horror of that time when children are sent to pay me a visit with a "You must go, my dear. She was your father's old aunt."

Since that young girl has been here my door-bell has rung all day; messenger boys have brought flowers and telegrams, letters have arrived by every mail, while she has been borne aloft on the waves of a great exaltation. All the world in which she and her fiancé have been nurtured are interested in her, and their interest will go on for her through all the successive stages of her joy, until she has daughters of her own, and that which has been given with such bounty to her she turns about and gives to others. And all this would be hers even were she less lovely than she is, because the human heart loves the spectacle of certain joys—that of the first engagement, a first marriage, a first-born; never the second of anything. But for us who are the old maids there are never any successive stages, never any

epochs. We are never heroines of special occasions touching universal sensibilities. Even the coming to us of some great desire—when indeed such desires do come—would mean the need of apologies and explanations, and the sympathy we received would be the sympathy of the few, like that which a second marriage sometimes inspires. Were I to wake Marion now, and bring her to a seat by my fire, and tell her that to me, too, had come a joy like her own, that with me, too, one was to walk hand in hand even as she is to walk with her lover—poor Marion! I know just what your disenchantment would be, little girl.

You would be sorry for me were I to tell you that I had nursed a hidden sorrow all my life: that I had once had and lost that which you now possess. How your heart

would ache for me! How sympathetic and gentle you would be! How full of a hushed, awed joy in your own condition! Out of the fullness of a great ecstasy it is so easy to be generous, and you would fail me in nothing that could soothe. But that I was to have it all! I, old as I am—oh, little Marion! I would not dare tell you, even if it were so. You must have your joy all to yourself, and mine would put too great a strain upon you. You would have to revolutionize too many of your ideas. There would be, too, I know very well, a little touch of pity, of compassion, in your tone, as though you were wondering if I knew that it had all come so late—too late, you would say to yourself, as though love belonged to the young alone. I should detect in your tone a great and vague misapprehension, which

I could not endure any more than you could endure my telling you—that which you would have a right to resent—that your own love-affair, sweet as it is, is yet very much like the love-affair of every other young girl. For you know how different it is. Have you not, indeed, told me so? His eyes are not like those of the man who is to marry your friend. His ambitions are not the same. He is not half so rich, and you are so willing to suffer for the man whom you have chosen privations which your friend will never be called upon to endure. He is likely, too, with his genius, to be more misunderstood than the gay young fellow whom your friend is to marry, and you are glad of the chance which it will give you to prove your own unfailing knowledge and understanding of him.

When I listen to you telling me these things with that long indrawn breath of a beautiful resolve, your gray eyes shining with tenderness, and your pretty hands clasped about your knees, I know very well that there is, as you say, everything to make your love-affair unique, to set it apart from all the loves of all the other women, like a gem for which we make a special casket. And I would not dare to ask if you knew how hideous this old and time-worn world would be if yours had been the only fresh and sweet affection born in it. Knowledge will come to you, and with it a great appreciation; and there will come a time, too, when you will bow your head in thankfulness that to others as well the eternally beautiful has come. This will be when your own daughters have grown and the sons who

have disappointed you find love at last.

In the meantime would you want to talk to me as freely as you do now if I told you that, just as you courted dreams there in your sleep, I too had nursed them alone here by my fire? I doubt it. One of the charms of an old maid's corner, as I know very well, is that to each new-comer the ground seems untrodden, unencumbered by other experiences with which those that each brings are to be measured. When one thinks a room is empty, one can talk about things just as they happened, and so get nearer to the truth of them, as one does who discusses them in the open air.

And, after all, it is a little thing to put aside one's own dreams and aspirations, to empty one's heart altogether of one's self, if by doing

so girls like the little Marion who lies asleep there will bring into our lives the freshness and beauty of young hearts. They could not and would not enter if they found the place full of ourselves. We cannot do much for the world, we old maids, but we can do this: we can keep an atmosphere about us in which the best of young hearts can grow.

Ah, there you are, little Marion! You could not sleep! You have been writing, and you want some one to carry out your letter, and in all this wind and snow? Your heart was so full, and you want to sit here on the floor, your head on my knee, and talk about him—how good he is, how happy you are, how beautiful it all is, how new! And you think I will understand as no one else understands?

Yes, dear, I understand.



III

MRS. BUCHANAN'S SON

MRS. BUCHANAN'S enunciation is slow and her phrases are rounded. This gives me time to think between her sentences. Her movements, too, are measured, so that I have ample leisure to watch her as she takes the seat she prefers in the corner of my carved mahogany sofa, a cushion tucked under each elbow, and just

beneath the old cathedral banner, now yellow with time, on which a Madonna is embroidered, standing triumphant over that serpent which has beguiled us all since poor Eve succumbed to its allurements in the garden of the world's early innocence.

Mrs. Buchanan, I realize more and more with each visit, is no longer thin. She is never able to fold her hands without bending her shoulders to it, so that she keeps both of her palms extended, one on either side, as if they were resting on the arms of an easy-chair. But she cannot, unbecoming as it is, resist the luxury of leaning back a trifle. It is so much more comfortable to the portly.

She comes to me when she has some subject of importance to communicate, and she likes me to draw my own chair up to face her as she

speaks. The dear lady has never been without her little court. It is somewhat smaller now, since the death of her distinguished husband, and less exclusive, a fact for which she is never able to account. She tells me, sometimes, that she is lonely.

When this husband who loved her was alive, her manner was one which many persons resented. They thought that it suggested the arrogance of wealth and worldly position. But those who felt affronted by it misinterpreted the very quality which had offended them. If Mrs. Buchanan's manner showed arrogance, which it certainly did, it was the arrogance of serene, untroubled wifehood only—that toplofty kind of content which comes to those who have always prospered in the way of fireside af-

fections, never knowing what it meant to hunger and thirst but for a crumb of them. It is the manner of those who have gone on taking these affections more and more as a matter of course, the more lavishly they were bestowed, until, at last, the sense of possessing some divine and inalienable right to them gets into the bearing, as the consciousness of being well-born affects even royalty. There is no manner in the world, as I know, so likely to make the outsider, the old maid or bachelor, or even the unhappy married one, feel—well, *nowhere!* I must confess that on certain dark days of my own, when the birds did not sing, and the sun did not shine, and the postman forgot to ring in my old maid's corner, I myself have found this manner of hers almost unfriendly. It accentuated such

differences! No spinster, I am sure, likes to feel herself to have been as mere stubble, ignored as of no account, when love, like a butterfly, was on the lookout for a blossom.

Mrs. Buchanan has lost the manner now, poor soul, but she has a black caniche who still possesses it. I always feel it when he whirls by me in their brougham while I go afoot on rainy days, and he looks at me out of the carriage-window as if he did not see me,—me, his best-beloved friend, as he beguiles me into believing at home when he wants a door opened. I get only a dim reminder of it in Mrs. Buchanan herself when she is able to gather about her some of her old retainers, like myself, willing enough to pay to her rounded speech the tribute of an undivided attention, not only because of the marked pleasure which she

receives, but because of an excellence in her of which she takes no account—an attention, if she but knew it, so much better than the adulation once proffered to the position that she occupied.

For my part, I am sorry for her, this widow of sixty, though I would not tell her so. The best of women, when they have been objects of the world's envy, never like pity to succeed to their estate. Beauty is gone from her, and prestige, everything but a certain dominance of spirit, with nothing left her to dominate except grown children who pay scant attention to her wishes.

She never knew, in the days of her greatest glory, that it was her eminent husband who brought the world to her feet,—few wives of distinguished men do,—that he made her place for her, gave her her position,

filled her table with notable guests, and made her the center of those interests which his ability and not her charms had created. Because she wrote the invitations, and went over the menus, and received with irresistible graciousness the flatteries of her guests, her black eyes alight with pleasure, and her pretty hands extended in welcome, she supposed that she drew the world to her fire-side. Now she only wonders why the army of great ones no longer stops at her door.

When, now and then, one or two fall out of the ranks to come in, for the sake of the days that have been or the leader who has departed, I find it infinitely pathetic to watch her settling herself to receive them, with that little satisfied drawing down of the shoulders and pulling in of the chin, as she takes her seat

and pulls her cushions under her elbows, like a child, I sometimes think, who has never grown up, and who at last has something for which she has been crying all day. And she has so little to talk about to these visitors who come to her out of the past and who go away thinking how she has changed—nothing to talk about except her sons and her daughters and their sons and their daughters, and all their domestic affairs, just as she used to talk about the affairs of the nation when her husband was alive. Her husband told her all about them.

Not even old maids who have had to look out for themselves, to make their own places in life, are as lonely in middle age as these widows of great men who never realized at the time what their husbands were doing for them. They always interest me

when I find them, and where are they not to be found? Sometimes, however, I run across one who is too vain to be lonely. Once, when I was a young girl, I met such a widow traveling. She had the air, when she walked, of one who feels that everybody is looking at her, yet who determines not to betray the fact of her knowing it. This air was always with her, even when no one was looking, because she never doubted that some one was. She gave me her maiden name when we met, fearing, as she afterward told me, that I might tell who she was and so attract attention to her. But when at last her own name followed it fell quite flat. There was nobody in my generation who knew who she was, she who had been in her day the very first lady in the land and the most courted. I would rather be as lonely

as Mrs. Buchanan is, I think, than like this one, guarding even to the point of discourtesy a secret that nobody wanted to know. There is at least a dignity in loneliness; and what is more futile, besides, than overdone efforts to protect one's self when nobody is making any attack?

But now Mrs. Buchanan's secret is out. I knew something was coming when I saw her arrive. Like doctors, we old maids get to understand the purposes of visits before even a symptom is discussed.

"I am so glad for you," I say to Mrs. Buchanan, when at last she confides to me, from the corner of my sofa, that her son is engaged, and to the most delightful of all the young women in town, the one young girl whom, had she, the mother, been allowed the choice,

Mrs. Buchanan would have chosen for a daughter.

Yes! Certainly I am glad, and I repeat my congratulations to Mrs. Buchanan sitting before me, a satisfied smile irradiating her features. But from my seat, as I look into her face, I see back of that satisfied smile things which she supposes I have never guessed, and of which she thinks the world is still in ignorance.

Ah! The smile of a mother! What powers of concealment lie in it! There are none of us, even the bravest or the rudest, who would dare venture behind its radiance into those hidden recesses of the soul where anxiety has stalked, and care, and often shame, alas! And the brighter the smile, the more at times it covers, the more impenetrable it becomes as a barrier guarding those who have erred and some-

times, like Arthur Buchanan, have been late in repenting. And so for the third time, touched by the pathos of that satisfied smile on the face of that mother, I tell her how glad I am.

“She is very beautiful, as you know,” Mrs. Buchanan goes on, from her seat under the old cathedral hanging on which the triumphant Madonna is embroidered. “I should have received as my daughter without question any one whom Arthur had loved; but with all the mistakes made in marriages to-day, it affords me infinite gratification to feel that my son has proved his wisdom by choosing so well.”

Mrs. Buchanan’s smile by this time has grown to a dazzling brightness, and I know that it is meant to make me forget the other woman whose brothers interfered. Every

one has heard the story. Being men, they would have nothing to do with Arthur Buchanan, and so they took their sister off to Europe, where she married a title at the last and died.

“Wisely indeed, my dear Mrs. Buchanan,” I keep repeating to myself even after she has gone, for I seem to see her still smiling on the sofa before me. At forty and with all his talents wasted, who of us supposed that Arthur would have had so much reason left? And the very loveliest of all the young women who came out this winter, as you his mother said! The most cultivated and the most charming, and in those wonderful eyes a look of which idealists are made.

I continue to think of the exquisite Eleanor, indeed, long after a yellow twilight has settled outside. So young, so beautiful, so brave,

with that marvelously rounded full chest which seems given to some women to hold larger hearts and higher aspirations than the rest possess. No wonder that Arthur's mother is happy!

I watched you, Mrs. Buchanan, as you turned my corner this afternoon, on your way home. You held your shoulders with a new air, and your head higher, and you walked as if you were carrying with you something rare and new and very pleasant, and not, as I have seen you so many times before, with the depressed posture of one from whom everything worth having was gone.

But Eleanor's mother! What, I wonder, has she to say to this marriage? Does she see only the worldly side, as widows with only daughters sometimes do? Or does she see

nothing but that strange something in her daughter which has always awed and dazzled her—that something more exalted than she can account for, like a breath out of heaven itself; that something of which great heroines and martyrs are born, and sometimes great mothers—mothers to their husbands as well as to their sons?

I am still thinking of Eleanor, now even after the night has come and my lamps are lighted and I sit alone before my fire. There on my book-shelves behind me are histories full of just such offerings as Eleanor means to make of herself. They date back to the days of myths and of legends when the sorcerer held some man in thrall, which only the love of a pure maiden could break. Or they go back to the days when dragons were only to be satisfied by

a feast upon virgins. And so these tales follow us down to times nearer our own and tell us of wicked men, of drunkards and blasphemers as old as Arthur Buchanan, transformed into angels by the love of some young vision of purity bringing faith into their lives, as Eleanor is now bringing it into that of Mrs. Buchanan's son.

The world approves of these stories. The mothers of derelict sons always do. When dramatized, these ancient tales furnish just the spectacle which the stage demands, and the histrionic, as we know, is good as a test whenever society is in doubt on a question of morals or of manners. The drama holds the mirror up to nature and, as in Claude Lorrain glasses, we obtain effects which delusions only help us to establish as exact. We get the "picture," as

stage-managers say, and that is what most of us judge by, rather than by the truth itself. And it is because the picture alone is considered, perhaps, that nowhere in any of those legends or histories on the shelves behind me is there a story told of an old or sin-worn woman redeemed by the love which a Sir Galahad consecrates to her service. It would not *look* well.

Siegfried was a prodigy of valor, to be sure, but Brünnhilde, who lay flame-wrapped, waiting for him at the other end of the story, was young and beautiful. And Andromeda, who, some lexicographers tell us (I quote now from the French), “personifies woman, the feebleness of whose nature and organization expose her to a thousand dangers, and who finds in man the representative of courage and

strength, her natural protector,"—Andromeda, too, was young and beautiful and unspotted from the world, like the exquisite Eleanor who is now to marry Arthur Buchanan!

I am quite aware, I repeat, that nothing else would look well. Old women have their appointed places on the stage, the authority for which lies deep-rooted in tradition. The sin-worn woman has as yet but a debatable and recently appointed place, and must be young and show promise before she is permitted to appear before the footlights. For that great audience, the world, always interested from its infancy in the spectacle of human problems, has not yet reconciled itself to those innovations by which the hearts of hardened women, like the hearts of hardened men whom maidens have

redeemed, are represented as having in them that spirit of eternal youth and righteousness which makes for the regeneration of character. When the sin-bound woman is to be redeemed by the offering of some life without a stain, as men are redeemed in the ancient legends, a child must be introduced for the woman's benefit, never a man. A man would represent an uncertain element; other men would be harassed by misgivings:—they would certainly question his motives.

But a child!

There can never be any mistake about what the child means, and nobody, however vast the throng of spectators, would doubt the power of the little one to work the miracle, nor question in the soul of the woman, hardened as she may be, the existence of an inextinguishable spark

which the trustfulness of helpless innocence will quicken into a sin-consuming flame. But no man must appear in the picture, unless, perhaps, he is shown in some attitude of helplessness to which the woman can minister as she does to the helplessness of the child. The aspect of things is altered when a man is broken down.

And, of course, I know why all this is, and, as the judge who sometimes instructs me along the line of the higher equities has told me, it only goes to prove that the real redemptive power lies in the love one gives, and not in the love one receives. But one must be an old maid in a corner, I sometimes believe, really to understand it all. For there are no traditions about corners to keep spinsters tied to one point of view. We have no sons and daugh-

ters of our own, by whose worldly interests we feel it our duty to measure each new revelation to mankind. Everybody's sons and daughters interest us, and therefore we pay as much heed to that innovation by which one is to be reclaimed as to that established custom by which another is to be protected. Even the hardened old women appeal to us as the children of somebody, as babies once of mothers whose hearts were afterward broken by fierce shame.

We see, for instance, that the idea of redemption is not to be resisted, whoever it may embrace; that is the one great dominating idea in the world, compelling to action even those unbelievers who would deny the teachings of the Nazarene. Literature becomes more and more controlled by it. So do human laws,

judgments, and institutions. That is the reason why hardened women hitherto scorned by story-tellers and dramatists, except for purposes of mischief, are now being brought more and more within the radius of the hope which was once held out only to men in thralldom for their sins. The woman, too, must be redeemed, although the world has as yet permitted no one but the child to be pictured as redeeming her. Yet sometimes it would even seem as if, like the stone which the builders refused, she is now to be made the chief of the corner, since by understanding what may happen to her we understand the redemptive principle in its highest interpretation. The principle by which she, when innocent, saved others, is to save her now in her guilt.

The story-tellers and the drama-

tists, then, who have pictured her as reclaimed, have only done what young persons do who recognize by some subtle inner sense an ideal which they cannot explain, yet by which they govern their conduct, until all at once, as older persons, the meaning of the ideal becomes clear to them, and they perceive the reason for their blind acceptance of a truth.

Long before they understand the purport of the words over which they falter, we teach our little ones to pray. Is it beyond reason to suppose that the world, still an infant in so many ways, might not be taught, after the same fashion, to utter truths the purport of which years beyond them in true comprehension?

And so once more, as I stand ready to turn down my lamp, I come

back to thinking of Mrs. Buchanan's son, who, as his mother believes, is to be saved from the thralldom of his sins by the offering of a beautiful maiden. And yet, if the things that I have just been thinking are so, and it *is* by the love that one gives and not that which one receives that the soul is lifted, it will be the soul of the beautiful Eleanor that rises higher by this marriage, after lies years beyond them in true comprehension?



IV

MY NEIGHBORS OF THE DOORWAYS

THOSE who have trees and fields to look upon can tell by the buds when spring is coming. But we who live in towns have other signs, not so beautiful but as unerring. There are always, for instance, the windows and doorways of our workaday neighbors, and as

the season advances there are the pavements.

During the winter the windows that are opposite me on my street with the cobbles are seldom open except for the shaking of dusters or rugs on a Saturday or for the washing of panes. Then the woman of the house appears, muffled in a worsted hood, a shawl around her shoulders, and I get a glimpse of children running round inside the room bundled up like their mother. There are no separate nurseries in these houses. But as the weather grows warmer life begins to show itself about the doorways. They are always being opened and shut by the children, baby-carriages wheeled by tiny sisters fill the sidewalk, and when the work of the day is done chairs are brought from inside, while around the door of every little shop

some family group is gathered. But by that time summer is well upon us.

When there is a hotel in the neighborhood—and there are still some old-fashioned hotels on streets of this kind in which retired army and navy officers reside, and impoverished gentlewomen with meager incomes get the benefit of respectable addresses on their cards—the men who are registered as guests begin with the warm days to use the pavements about the hotel as their smoking-rooms. Chairs are placed there for them. I know one hotel of this kind. It still stands on a corner. I used to see it from the windows of a woman whom I know. She told me that she always knew by the shifting of that group of chairs, now to catch some shadow, now a cooling breeze, not only what the weather was, but which way the wind was

blowing, and, as the chairs emptied or filled, the very hour of the day itself. She went so far as to try to convince me that from long study and watching of the pavements below her (she had nothing else to look at) she had learned to know whether the day overhead were cold or warm, sunny or cloudy, because for each change of the weather the stones of the pavement had a different color. She may have been right. I only caught the pathos of her knowledge—the knowledge taught by a city where trees never flourish, where flowers are grown only in pots, and there is no grass except in formal squares, and the sky is a mere patch of gray or blue, and but one star at best shines in at the windows. Nature meant us to know more of her than this and to read the signs she displays for us all, and I am not

sure the first weathervane was not an affront upon her from which the world can date the decline of its understanding. When we miss what she has to say, then she lets us invent our machines. And how many we have, with our thermometers and our barometers, and all the rest, even those for reading the signs of the heart and misinterpreting everything.

I never feel, then, that the summer has really begun until I can see, as I do to-night, the chairs of my opposite neighbors brought on to the street—those of my neighbors, I mean, whom I can see from my windows that look to the east. My neighbors who live on the side of the street with the asphalt and that I see from my windows on the south have all gone away by that time, leaving only a stray husband or two

in the hands of some caretaker, with parlors all tied up in linen covers, a few spoons and forks left out in the dining-room, and just so many sheets and towels up-stairs—desolate, abandoned houses shorn of every allurements but a bed and some chairs, which husbands desert as soon as they can for their clubs.

And neither do I ever feel that I have a real neighborhood until with summer these chairs are brought out after a day's work is done. For then I have all my acquaintances—and they are all acquaintances; some are friends—spread out before me like books on their shelves, each one with a title that any one can read: husbands and wives and children all grouped together, with never a stray volume found on a shelf to which it does not belong. On this side of my corner there are no husbands and

wives traveling separate paths, one going off for a change of scene, the other staying behind and growing restless for diversion. Here they work together and play together and rest together, hand in hand, with one common purpose in view.

There is never any doubt, indeed, about their working together. I have a butcher on my street, with the cobbles, whose children will some day, I am sure, be bowing to me from their victorias while I go toiling up the street; and I shall not resent their prosperity nor feel that my dollars have contributed to it. He has a wife who, day in and day out, sits behind his desk and has done so for years, a gentle, dignified woman, ever watchful of his interests, who counts all the change and attends to all the books and keeps an atmosphere of wholesomeness

about her. That is why, from being a boy, when I first knew him, who hardly understood the cutting of a roast, he has now nearly a score of white-aproned attendants about him, in the cleanest and freshest and most inviting of shops. And the best of all is that he realizes just what he owes this wife of his and to her devotion to his interests, for he told me so himself, and only a day or two since.

I do not know a better butcher nor one more sympathetic or more generous. I once met an old maid in his shop, a gentlewoman, but reduced and obliged to write for her living. She had come in to say that if he did not mind she would like to leave her bill for another month, until a story she had written was paid for. And how embarrassed she was as she spoke, halting over every syl-

lable, till you might have supposed she had a theft to confess. But I never saw a face to match his own as he leaned over the counter to answer her. His red cheeks and mild blue eyes radiated the very spirit of beneficence as I heard him say: "Don't even think about it. I have more money now than I know what to do with. Let it all go over till September." And this was in May.

Then there is the young expressman just opposite my window. He and his wife are before their door now, sitting side by side in two cane-bottomed chairs, resting together in the twilight. He had only one horse and wagon when he married this clever and sweet-tempered woman only a few years since, and now he has half a dozen. All day long she is in their office cheerfully taking orders for trunks and giving them, and

only when Sunday comes is their door locked while they both go off together for their holiday.

And the plumber's wife. How faithfully she labors over the books, and with what patience she presides behind the counter. They, too, are both before their door to-night in chairs drawn close together. I meet her at my bank sometimes of a Saturday morning. I would go to Europe every summer and make a tour of the world besides if I could ever carry such a roll of bills as she deposits.

Up on the roof another husband and wife sit together. Two old people these are. He is the man who makes antique furniture on the second floor, which he sells on the first. I have never discovered what she did—the varnishing, perhaps, or perhaps the punching of pinholes to

give a worm-eaten look; but every night they go up on the roof to play cards with each other until it is too dark to see any more. They sit, as becomes their years, well sheltered behind two red cotton bed-quilts that are pinned up to keep off the draft. Sometimes she plays solitaire while he reads the paper, but that is when business has been good and he has had too many interruptions below.

I like these neighbors of mine. I like the horses, too, in the feed-store, and the way they are taught, when unharnessed, to follow their drivers around the street. And I like the plumber's dog, friend to every passer-by. And I like the birds that hang among the many-colored signs and advertisements in the window of the expressman's wife. And I like the undertaker—but he is a

little further along and nearer the druggist.

And, now I think of it, by the way, I believe that I am the only woman in my little world of five-o'clock teas who even knows an undertaker, much less who likes one. Certainly I never heard one of them discussed among my friends. Nor can I recall a man among all those whom I know who has ever met an undertaker except in circumstances which he did not care to renew. I confess that before my acquaintance with this one began I never thought of them with any pleasure, nor dreamed of their being possibly individuals like the rest of us, having family ties of their own, or homes in which cheerful friends and neighbors came and went, birds sang and flowers bloomed, and in which there could be any fun or laughter, so

grave and unmoved do these men seem on occasion.

But my undertaker has a wife, too, like the others in my neighborhood; very gentle and kind and always at home, presiding over the records and accounts at her husband's desk, or sitting with him, as she is doing now, before their door, now that the nights have grown warm. She lets me use her telephone. Our acquaintance began that way. Hers was, then, the only pay station in the block. It took courage to go in, being my first venture of the kind, but my message was urgent and I could not wait. And it certainly took courage to stay, for there was a woollen curtain dividing the front of the office from the back, and as I waited for "Central" to answer I heard a ghostly voice behind those woollen curtains

that made me tremble. I discovered a little later that it was only the voice of a brightly plumaged South American parrot muttering in imitation of me! An ill-natured bird, as all the neighbors know, always put out with somebody. Telephoning was by no means easy, for a small terrier snapped about my heels and barked. But the canary bird and the wife were gentle. One sang in high trills, and the other asked friendly questions. I found the undertaker's office by no means a gloomy or a solemn place.

Since my first visit I have come to the conclusion that the undertaker himself likes the loquacity of the parrot and the barking of the dog, and even the uncertain tempers of his pets, as a sort of offset to the silence of the houses which he frequents. At least, he knows, when he opens

his own door, whether the members of his household are all alive and well. Then, too, undertakers, like the rest of mankind, must be subject at times to reactions after strains, and the strain of a perpetually solemn countenance must be the worst strain of any, especially to a man who, like this neighbor of mine, was famous in his youth for prowess in outdoor sports, and particularly for his courage in stopping runaway horses. Each of us has to have an outlet of some kind, and when a man's profession robs him of a natural form of expression, what is wiser (as is proved to us every day) than that he should choose some sort of domestic paraphernalia to provide a safe outlet for him?

Yes! whichever way I turn, there on the other side of my cobbled street are husbands and wives (those

faithful helpmeets), and children—children everywhere as thick as bees. Occasionally there is a young man—possibly a lodger—who, ready dressed for more exciting diversions elsewhere, will loiter for a moment about the door. But I never see a young woman among these domestic groups. When a new family with young daughters moves into an empty floor, the daughters stay upstairs at night. I can see them all, for nothing is hidden. When a suitor arrives he takes a chair by an open window. Generally a piano is thrummed, and there is a great deal of fanning, for the lights are always turned up, however warm the night or low the ceiling. Then a marriage follows, and the young people disappear into homes of their own. But never until a daughter comes back as wife and mother,

bringing her baby-carriage, does she sit with her elders around the doorway at night.

In this workaday world there are no other interchanges of courtesy among the young, and none other would be understood. Everything has a serious purpose here, and attentions that have not a definite object in view are frowned upon as suggesting a lack of honesty in the man. Nobody pays visits except with avowed reasons, and nobody stays at home to receive them except when whole families arrive together. It is all industry and the preparation of workers for industrious lives and for the making of respectable homes. For all the other things that go to make up life—its grace and charm, and its more intangible beauty—for all that goes to the cultivation of those rare flowers of our civiliza-

tion, our young girls, one must go to the other side of my corner and look from my windows to the south.

But one must wait until winter to do that.

For Helen has gone now; I had a letter from her only to-day—beautiful Helen with her brown hair and gray eyes, and that air of a fine reserve which lends her such distinction; beautiful Helen, indeed, whose parlors are always filled with fresh roses and orchids that have been sent her, and who has every morning a dozen or more invitations to answer before luncheon, and yet who never forgets to go twice a week and read to old women in hospitals.

And Beatrix has gone, too, of course,—Beatrix, who, with her golden hair and her modeled chin, might just be stepping out of the frame of a famous court beauty, yet

whose hands are so strong and so vital with an honest purpose as they clasp your own. Then her eyes! They have the look in them that belongs alone to one with a "steadfast soul, calm in the poise of natural things."

And Mildred has gone, and Marjorie. All the young girls, in fact, on my street or on any other street in town; gone with their beauty, their accomplishments, their grace, their candor, their courage, their honest purposes—gone, all gone, carrying with them the life that makes our streets gay with color and charm and our houses merry with young voices; gone with everything that makes lovely and joyous and wholesome and sweet, the interchange of courtesies among young men and women.

And it is the absence of this very interchange of courtesies, neither

known nor possible of comprehension among my workaday neighbors, which makes a mutual understanding so hard at times between my two sets of acquaintances. Sometimes it seems to me that it is a lack of this understanding, common the world over, which lies at the root of so much of the antagonism, the prejudices, the fearful misunderstandings and misinterpretations dividing one class from another. The old family butler or coachman or nurse understands far better than the most intelligent of small shop-owners, what the lives of young girls and men can be; what the sweetness of the freedom is; of the joyful, happy intercourse where friendships are permitted and the serious purposes of life (and there are serious purposes among them) do not interfere with the more irresponsible asides.

And when I think of our young

girls, those rare flowers of our time, I know that there is another difference which makes their right to pre-eminence over all those others, no matter how much of excellence, of virtue, and of integrity those others may represent.

These have courage to say, "I love," and sometimes "I love you," and to rise to greater heights with the saying, because the sense of possession is never so strong in one who can say it. And it marks, I believe, a higher evolution in the woman to be able to say, "I love you," as it marks a higher stage in the man to be able to understand the plane on which the woman stands who says it.

But who ever heard one of the workaday world say, "I love." Ask your laundress some day, if you know her well enough; or your seamstress, or the wife of your

baker. She will tell you that her husband is a good man, that he works hard; that he does not drink; that he saves his money, or that he gives it to her on Saturday night; that he is kind to the children; but you will never hear her say that she loves him for it. And if you say, as I have done, to the mother of a bride to be, who is full of the approaching nuptials and the splendor of the bridegroom, "I suppose that your daughter is dreadfully in love," she will shrug her shoulders and come down to earth again, telling you, "He has a good home to give her." And the bride-elect, among all her blushes, will have nothing else to say, not even to him.

I used to wonder if it were only my experience which had led me to draw these conclusions about contrasting the courage of the more

highly evolved individual to say, "I love," with that of the others to whom it is a sort of shame. I referred to the subject once while talking with a judge who had presided for many years over one of the great criminal courts of our country. He told me that among all the witnesses whom he had ever examined, and these by no means the criminals only, he had never yet heard one of these people say that he or she loved another person. Sometimes, as he told me, he would try to draw an individual out on these subjects; to get at the reason for their jealousies or their resentments or their self-sacrifices, but, try as he would, he could never draw from one of them a confession of love.

Yet one who doubts the existence of it among those who have not the courage or the ability to express it,

need only look out of my window with me to-night at all those husbands and wives across the street, side by side in the deepening twilight, faithful to each other, kind to each other, working for each other, fond of their children, fond of their animals,—husbands and wives in all things united, good citizens, good friends, and the very source of strength among the nations.

But the flowers!

The flowers of our civilization, I still insist, are our young girls, with the courage of their sentiments, the beauty and freedom of their lives, with their altruistic purposes, their wide-eyed vision, where they stand looking always toward clearer horizons beyond.



V

SOME OF MY SUNDAY VISITORS

IT is Sunday. I have known it since I waked, for there is never any mistaking a Sunday in town, on my corner, even when, as to-day, I can get no nearer a church than a view of some steeple from my windows.

The traffic with trucks has ceased

over the cobbles. The door of every little shop is closed; the postman has rung but once, and then with a special letter; and for the first time during the week policemen are visible gossiping on the flagstones. But these few signs would never make the coming of a Sunday for me. There are others by which I should always know, even were certain family customs of long standing to fail me.

With my coffee, then, my morning papers arrive, not, as on other days, neatly folded and laid with my letters on the tray. My Sunday papers have to be carried under the arm, being as huge and cumbersome in form as those great yellow-brown tomes bound in calfskin that filled the shelves of my father's ecclesiastical library. Some of the papers are aflame with the three primary

colors of cheap illustrations, and all of them are in sections. Only this morning I counted as many as sixteen sections in one journal.

Before I had half done scanning their head-lines alone, the church bells began to ring—not the church bells, it should go without saying, that are hung in that part of town upon which I look from my windows to the east. The devout in that quarter are summoned first to their devotions at dawn. This is proper, since they are all day-laborers and tired. On the other side, where the opulent dwell, things have been arranged in another fashion, and, as we are informed in certain hotels, no late morning sleeper, however idle his week has been, need fear being roused by a church bell on Sunday until noonday is well-nigh upon him.

It is while this second set of bells

is being rung that every car is brought to a standstill under my windows, to take on or let off whole families of well-dressed church-goers—fathers, mothers, and children out in the street together, in the middle of the day, for the only time during the week. Once they have all been settled in their pews, the cars go by at longer intervals. No gongs are sounded, and the quiet is broken only by the rumble of half-empty trolley-cars. I begin then for the first time to hear sounds from the pavement—invariably the voice of the policeman engaged in his amicable Sabbath-day parley with friends. Then comes the slow, uneven “creaking of noisy boots,” and I know, without looking, that some laborer, ill adjusted to his Sunday apparel, is going by with his children to spend the day elsewhere. After that, one of my pros-

perous neighbors from the other side of my corner, his paper read and his family still at church, comes out to exercise his dog. I catch the whiff of a good cigar as he saunters by whistling to his terrier. But I never hear *his* shoes. The only other tread I hear is that of the saddest sound I know, made by a procession of Friendless Children, who must walk without speaking, a long line of them, all of a size, and dressed in bonnets pathetically alike.

As one o'clock approaches, the cars begin to run again at more frequent intervals, stopping for young men and women who are never bound in this direction on any other day, nor with each other at this hour, but who, morning services being over, are now on their way to Sunday luncheons up-town, the young women in smart street-gowns, the young

men in high, brightly polished silk hats, and carrying canes, those evidences with which a very young gentleman thinks to convince us that he is grown up. When he has grown he forgets the cane until, with the coming of decrepitude and as a gentleman of advancing years, he seeks with a jaunty air and a twirl of his stick to bring us once more to his way of thinking of himself,—this time of his being as young as he ever was,—so unending is man's struggle to impress upon the world his own opinion of his powers.

But nobody has hurried or rushed. On a Sunday there are no trains to catch, only sermons. It is astonishing, the difference that it makes. Even the car-conductor feels it. Freshly shaven and newly collared, he lets his passengers on and off with an air of indulging each one's

infirmities that is altogether refreshing.

By two o'clock the streets are deserted again, but at three a new exodus begins. People pass and re-pass, the newly married stopping for intimate consultations in front of those windows which display for their benefit imitations of genuine antique furniture. The cars begin to be crowded on their way to the park. Cabs roll by over the asphalt, then hansoms, holding happy young fathers and mothers with pretty children packed in all about their knees, the little boys in leather leggings and the little girls in fluffy bonnets tied under the chin. With the coming of those hansoms and the children I know that my small world of five-o'clock teas is either out for the making of informal visits, or staying at home to receive them,

and I know, too, that some of those young fathers and mothers will stop at my door, and that then, for but too brief a time, as I revel in a whole family grouped about my fireside, my old maid's corner will blossom as with roses.

No one of all these tokens to which I have referred would have deceived me. But had each and every one of them failed, I should have known what day it was when, toward five o'clock, the colonel arrived with his wife. It is only on a Sunday that they have time for the making of afternoon visits together, or that any husband and wife in town have time, for the matter of that.

And how delightful it is to have the colonel come, with his wit and his charm and his bonhomie ! He tells me that he was sixty the other day, but I could not believe it. Some-

times he makes me think of a coal that will not blow out. Every wind—and his have been winds of many adversities—only makes him glow the brighter, although the gray ashes of some fires are to be seen scattered over his hair and mustache.

He lost one eye when fighting as a volunteer during the Rebellion. A black silk patch hides the record of it—a patch which he wears with such frankness that his friends forget it forthwith. But this may be because that other eye of his is so brilliant, illuminating all of his deeply lined countenance, drawing you to it as to an ember snapping in the dark, yet, like a search-light, letting nothing escape it as it turns in its socket. When I find that one eye watching me at times I say to myself that I do not wonder at any of the fables which gave the Cyclops

fame. A single eye suddenly seems to me to possess such vast, illimitable powers in itself—perhaps because everything that other men put into both the colonel puts into this single one; perhaps because there is no need of that one eye focusing with any other; perhaps because, being but a single point, you *have* to look into the very eye with which he is looking at you.

The colonel also has some fingers missing from his right hand, but this, happily, does not interfere with his exercise of those gifts which have made him famous at the bar. He is not a Colonel Sellers. He can declaim with his hands clasped behind him. It is the loss of these fingers and that eye, however, which has made that dear and comfortable wife of his so tender to him. And how good a comfortable wife can be! I

know so many of the other kind, such estimable women, but, like the tufted horsehair furniture of a generation ago, not conducive to restfulness. But one knows in a moment that, for all his brilliancy, the colonel always rests when with his wife.

I love to watch them when they are making ready to go, and I generally manage an excuse to follow them into the hall. He always stands upright before her while she begins by arranging the white silk muffler round his neck. Then she helps him on with his overcoat, pulling it up about his neck, smoothing the silk muffler down again and tucking it well under the velvet collar of his coat. Then she fastens all the buttons slowly, as if each one represented to her an opportunity for special devotion. And when all this is done, and exactly to her liking,

she lays the palms of both hands for one brief instant flat on the lapels of his coat, while, with a little pressure and the sigh of an infinite satisfaction, she murmurs, "Now!" Nothing else; but I always find a sweeter meaning in it.

I have seen her doing this a hundred times, but I have never failed to catch under the lid of his one eye, as he stands glancing down at her, his look of quiet content in her service; nor have I ever missed the little lifting of his shoulders with the joy of it all. Yet he only stands the straighter, chin raised, chest expanded. His military training taught him that.

He has some pretty daughters at home who wait upon him, too, who help him with his hat and his gloves, and who hover about him with counsel and suggestions when he starts

for his office in the morning. He calls them his board of lady managers; but this is because in his adorable way he dominates them all.

The colonel always arouses my enthusiasm; yet I never see him with that black patch over his eye, and that glove with its empty fingers, without wondering why it is that the world regards so differently the scars of men and of women, even when those scars have been won in an honorable service.

I have a clever friend from the South who, as a girl, and when the war had closed, worked in her father's tobacco-fields, over the horses and over the broken-down fences, until comfort reigned at home again and she took to letters as a profession. I saw her once hold up her toil-worn hands, full of scars, with each joint out of shape, while she

said to me, laughing: "It is sometimes easier to escape the consequences of our sins than to get away from the records of our virtues."

That is the trouble, I suppose. Tradition has done nothing for her, and so the records of a woman's virtues have to be explained. A man with an arm or a leg missing, especially if he be an erect man, instantly arouses a thought of heroism,—unless, of course, one has lived in the neighborhood of trolleys,—and a certain spontaneous enthusiasm for the man, like that which the colonel inspires, takes possession of the beholder. Such a quickening of the pulse before the signs and tokens of an unknown woman's misadventures would be an impossibility, and a silk patch over one of her eyes, like that which the colonel wears, would excite pity rather than applause.

Then there are the manners of some successful women who by their own endeavors have won a way in the world. What scars these manners are on an engaging womanliness—first a grace lost in the conflict, then a gentleness. Had a man suffered these losses, who would reckon them when the sum of his successes was told? And how convincing the very brusqueness and energy and even the lack of softness in his manners would be! We would believe in him at once—confiding our fortunes to him. But in a woman, and perhaps wisely,—who can tell?—these signs and tokens of an heroic struggle into which necessity alone may have driven her are counted as disfigurements, and the record of each of her virtues has to be explained, like the trousers of Rosa Bonheur, if their exercise has

involved the sacrifice of a single feminine habit. The records of her pleasures are other concerns so long as fashion approves. Her hair may be sunburnt, but it must not be because she has chosen to deprive herself of a bonnet for the benefit of some pauper. And her hands may be large and muscular, but the muscles must be those developed by an outdoor sport, not those which any manual labor indoors has strengthened, even when that labor has been undertaken because of grim poverty.

Yet, oddly enough, I can count on the fingers of one hand those women among the married ones who have no weakness for displaying the records of their virtues, however unbecoming and sometimes disfiguring these records may be, wearing them often, as a man does his medals across his breast, for all the world to see.

And no wonder! They prove at times the most efficacious weapons for the winning of special indulgences from husbands.

But who ever cared for the records of an old maid's virtues? And what would these records win her if she too displayed her unbecoming tokens for all mankind to see? If then, unlike the married ones, we hide our records away, along with our faded hopes and fond delusions, does our act prove in us a greater excellence, since we too are but women, after all, craving, like the married ones and from mere femininity, many an indulgence on our own account? For are we less in need of the hand-touch, the note of compassion, the stimulus of a perfect understanding? Is it not, I sometimes wonder, simply because we know how little the display of our records would win for

us? For our corners! We have our corners to consider. What jeopardy they would suffer with records intruded! We who are the old maids understand this so well, and that even corners are preserved to us only when we fill them with proofs of new impulses, never allowing them to be cumbered with records of past despairs.

What old maid, indeed, would expect anything but laughter were she to assume toward a record of one of her heartaches the attitude of that married one who was here this afternoon? No young neophyte ever pointed to a reliquary with the air which she assumes when referring to a streak of gray hair, quite marring her beauty, which covers part of her head just above her left ear. She is so solemn as she talks about it, so mysterious, suggesting

so much and telling so little. I never yet have learned more than that the trouble began in her early married life, and that even the *clergyman* was amazed at her forbearance. She told me to-day, however, that she had never been quite the same since it happened.

“Quite the same?” I felt like saying. “I should hope not. No one ought to be quite the same after anything; and if, as at times, we unhappily are, what wretched, dried-up, stagnant, incapable-of-growing kinds of people we prove ourselves to be! We may be better after suffering, and we may be worse; but our condition must depend upon ourselves, and should never be laid to the nature of our calamities.”

Ought I to have been sorry for this woman, my guest, telling me the

same thing, and for the hundredth time, and just after I had referred to the colonel's courage and his ability to make us forget everything in the pleasure he contributes by his charm? Perhaps I was tactless to say anything about him, since nobody who is gloomy ever likes to hear how cheerful somebody else can be.

But she would have me believe that there are some troubles for which there is no forgetting, and that if the colonel had had hers! And round again, like the needle of a compass, the conversation swings back to that bunch of gray hairs spoiling her beauty. I hate to think it, but sometimes I feel sure that every one of those gray hairs is numbered. She would never submit to a loss of them; that I know. And why should she? They have proved

such consolations to her—as tombs do to some temperaments.

I suppose that when one touches upon the subject of records, one gets down to fundamental instincts in the human race, since even savages have displayed them, and almost every household in our own day has one or more to show. We have grown beyond the savage state in some particulars, however, for the records of each other's virtues are a delight to all the members in a modern home. Out of my window there I see passing every one of these Sunday mornings, on her way to church, a bent old lady leaning on the arm of her daughter. The very stoop of that old lady's shoulders is, to the children who love her (especially to the sons, who, being men, like to see evidences of a woman's toil), a sign manual of her excel-

lence, a very stamp and proof of her right to their veneration. And the old lady believes so, too. Even when she was younger she would not straighten up. "When you have suffered as much as I have," I once heard her say, with a toss of her head, to a child, "your back will be bent too."

But I can count among my friends—the more joy mine—another old lady, older by a dozen years than this one, and who has suffered vastly more. Yet everything of trouble that has touched her sunny nature—time, sorrow, and fierce pain—has only melted from her "gently, like a snowflake." She holds her head up and her shoulders straight, and she would count it as wrong not to do so as not to appear freshly dressed every morning. I know some flowers that are like her. Tempests may

sweep over them, and rains beat them down to the very earth at night ; but on the morrow they are always erect again, their lovely faces upturned and toward the sun.

Now that I think of it, I believe that there are almost as many men as women in love with their records, and who hope to gain as many indulgences by the display of them, more particularly when those records have anything to do with affairs of the heart. There's Henry Clayton, at any rate. No one has ever heard him mention among his friends the fact of his lungs being weak, for he likes to fancy himself in the very thick of the fight among his fellows, and a confession of physical weakness would send him to the wall. But he gets his satisfaction out of that skeptical manner of his, that air of not believing in any one,—in any

woman, at any rate,—a skepticism which he is sure to intrude on you with his dark and melancholy countenance within a few hours after your meeting him, while he hints vaguely that, though he forgave her, his eyes were opened about women.

His eyes opened! Even his mother, in a moment of confidence, will tell you about it, when she is trying to account to you for some of his failures in life.

“Your eyes opened, indeed!” I long to say to him, and, being an old maid, I believe that I could. “Your eyes are not opened, my dear Mr. Clayton; they are shut tight, with lids pressed close, and you prove it by your finding it so hard to see anything else but that one early blight to your affection. To the very young women of your acquaintance you may seem a great

soul wrapped in sorrow, but not to us who are older, my friend. If you but knew it, sorrow like that of yours is very cheap and very little, very withered up and good for nothing. The only sorrow worth anything in this world is sorrow for others, and sorrow for others means helping others, not hugging our woes to ourselves."

For I believe that the really brave and the really great make us forget their scars, all the records of their hurts and wounds, just as the colonel does, or as Janet does, with whom, since it is Sunday, I shall dine to-night. Brave Janet without question, who has never permitted one of us to treat her as an invalid, and this even after twenty years of pain; who has not permitted her back to bend, or her face to be drawn, or her clothes to go out of fashion, or

the appointments of her room to suggest any one single habit of the invalid.

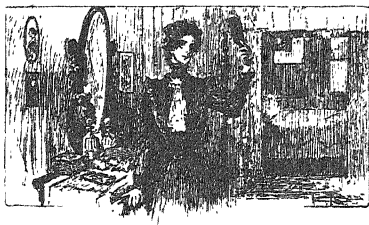
Yes, since it is Sunday, I go there to dine. It would hardly be Sunday night in town if one did not, in dining or inviting to dine, observe certain long-established customs peculiar to the day.

But I shall wonder, and for the hundredth time, as I am driving to Janet's, where those other people dine whom I always meet going to church in the evening. They belong as much to certain streets on Sunday night as the young men and women whom I see getting on the cars on their way to luncheons uptown with their friends belong to my corner at noon.

And they are so good, and so honest, and so upright, and so earnest, so eminently all that is respect-

able and fine, these people who go to church on Sunday night. You can read integrity and devotion in their faces as they pass. But they will be people who, for some inscrutable reason, you never know where to locate at any other time.

If I were to wake suddenly from a fever, and, looking out of my windows, see these people passing by, I would know in an instant that Sunday in town, and on my corner, had come.



VI

MY COUSIN SUSANNA

IT has been twenty-five years, has it not?—yes, quite twenty-five, I believe,—in which we have been trying to understand each other, my cousin Susanna and I. Yes, it must be all of twenty-five years, because her eldest son is twenty at the very least.

For twenty-five years, then, we have been stumbling along in our friendship, loving each other all the time, loyal to each other so far as loyalty without understanding can go, and yet always in our relations to each other like two persons talking with a wall between them, over the top of which only their heads are visible.

And all of this began when my cousin Susanna married Harry Peake, and I remained single. For marriage seems to be a kind of Tower of Babel among women. Each one afterward speaks a different tongue. There were Susanna and I, for instance. We grew up together, went to school and out into the world together, shared every thought and every secret aspiration. Then Susanna married, and lo! with that Tower of Babel, her marriage,

there arose between us the greatest confusion. She could no longer comprehend me. And no wonder, her own vocabulary had so altered. The old familiar words of our girlhood had another color for her now, as wife. Love meant a new thing, friendship no longer the old one. She felt herself to be of a different order, and I sometimes think that because I was a spinster she regarded me as belonging only to some species.

There have been times, for example, when for her benefit I have repeated some of the very words that as young girls we were accustomed to use in discussing our futures and the mistakes of other people—words that in those old days embodied ideals from which, whatever might come after, we, at least, unlike the other people, were never to depart. But when Susanna has

heard me repeat them it has been as though she had never heard them before. "You do not know what you are talking about," she has answered. "What you are saying is all nonsense." And then she has added, as if to prove her point: "You have never had children to bring up, nor the tastes of a husband to consider."

At other times, when all her troubles have been turned inside out and upside down for my inspection, and I have ventured on a word of that counsel which she has assured me she came to seek, she has said to me: "You do not understand. Perhaps it is too much to expect that you should, living as you have done, with no one to defer to but yourself."

Then there have been still other moments in which Susanna has appeared to comprehend my speech,

but only to evince a certain consternation at what she thinks she has discovered in my words. Then it has been a "How can you?" or a "I thought that you, at least, with your bringing up, would escape the influences of the day." And when Susanna has said "influences of the day," I have been well-nigh convinced of how evil they are, of their being much worse, in fact, than any hitherto encountered by the world. Yet I have always maintained, and I do still maintain, except when Susanna uses that tone to me, that at every stage of man's development there have been influences of the day to consider quite as complex as any which assail us now, and that the race has grown in girth and stature only according to the choice which the individual made of those influences to which he should have opened

his nature. For each of us must make such a choice. It is man's privilege to do so, and his obligation. As he builds his house to catch this breeze or to draw that hour's sunshine to him, so he must build his character in order that from every point of that ever-widening horizon of human thought he can draw to him only those particular influences by which his spirit is to be refreshed and his full growth attained.

Sometimes Susanna comes to challenge me to a discussion by telling me in a roundabout fashion what she thinks wives ought to resent in their husbands, and then I know, of course, that what she has wanted to say is something about what she resents in Harry. I then become roundabout too, because I never like to recognize any difficulty as her

own, and I say that it seems to me that most troubles in life would drop from the arduous places if we understood better what generosity meant as a curative factor in life, so that those things, for instance, which were required of us because of some position which we occupied, were made things which we gave freely and gladly and even joyously. Then the very act of giving would lift us as givers above the plane where personal demands and obligations ruled, making even the least of servitors equal with the highest. But Susanna, hearing my answer, doubts me at once, although I have been careful for her sake not to refer in any way to the subject of husbands and wives. She fears, however, that, not understanding her own side, I may be taking that of Harry. "These are hardly sub-

jects for discussion between us. You must know some very queer wives," she will say. Or she will not reply at all, except with a look of pained wonder on her face. For she holds me in never-ending question, as she would one of an alien people. When, as has sometimes happened, I have been led on my own account to tell her what I think love ought to be in its wide, all-embracing quality, she only wonders if I, like many other spinsters, am becoming sentimental or perhaps (and this strikes her as much more alarming) too liberal!

I have only to tell her what kind of man stands for an ideal with me, giving her suggestions which even as an old maid I know might be of service in the training of her son—I have only to do this to have her become reflective at once, while she

tries to decide, with close-drawn eyebrows, what man it is who has affected me so strongly, and whether it can be—and at my age, too—that I, a spinster, mean to do something silly, and marry. As if to marry, indeed, were the very silliest thing of which a spinster could be guilty! No other spinster would think it silly, I am sure; only somebody who is married herself, like Susanna.

She never, however, makes me feel the height and breadth and thickness of the dividing-wall between us, nor myself so much of an alien, an outsider, an anomaly, as when I talk of forgiveness between men and women, and of that love which would mean compassion even for the greatest offender—a compassion which, in its desire to help the one who has sinned, would forgive the injury that love itself had received. To

my cousin this is all strange parlance, the language of invidious foes, since love to her means a much simpler and safer and much more domestic affair—nothing more or less, in fact, than a belief in Harry, in Harry's rectitude and Harry's honor. "I could not love my husband," she will say to me, "if I did not respect him, and I could not respect him if he were not all the things that I thought him to be." Then she will add, in a tone that well-nigh overcomes me, and to which I have never yet grown accustomed: "And certainly I would not *want* Harry ever to forgive me if I were the kind of woman who would fail him." When I try to argue further, as on occasions I have had the courage to do, she tells me that I might much better leave the discussion of these subjects alone, for if I had a

husband I would feel "quite differently."

Our discussions have always ended in this same way. She has thrust me out of every contest of opinions, as the Romans would have thrust some incompetent from an arena. I have not always thought it kind in Susanna, for is there a spinster who lives who could have helped being single? It has seemed hardly fair, either, since most of her own knowledge has come from the study of one man's idiosyncrasies.

And then with what skepticism Susanna regards me when, in reply to something she has said about mothers and children, I tell her that to me the highest motherhood seems to be one which concerns itself with the nurturing of ideals, whether in one's own children or in the children of one's neighbor, or even in a man.

At my mention of the word "man" she bridles. She is not sure where such views are going to carry me, a spinster. But I go on to tell her that to be filled with the mother spirit one must love all children alike. "What!" she exclaims, "do you mean to tell me that I must love each little ragamuffin whom I see in the street as I love my own children? One's first duty is to one's own. The very idea of it! If you had ever been a mother yourself, you would know." But I go on to tell her—and she cannot argue me out of this—that I think that even as old maids we can have this mother-love, and that, married or single, we fail in it if we talk about the things that other people's children do, making them public as we never would make public the wrong things of which our own children are

guilty. And from this I go on to say that all gossip, all parade of our neighbor's peccadillos, is wrong, since the oldest of men and women are but half-grown children, after all, and each is somebody's child, and that therefore those of us who had the right love of ideals, or the mother-love, in us should let those peccadillos be forgotten, while we gave the better part of our neighbor's character a chance to grow up.

It is at this point that Susanna invariably folds her hands, and, with earnest eyes and that tightening of the lips which implies the keeping back of much else which she would like to say, she asks me what I think the home would be if the wives and mothers in it grew lax about the morals of those of their neighbors, old or young, whom they admitted to their firesides, or to whom they

permitted an intimacy with their children.

This, then, is the way in which Susanna and I have talked for twenty-five years. In all that time the dividing-line has never been down between us, nor has she ever admitted that I too might be a woman, claiming with her the right to certain inheritances bequeathed to us by the primal man, with the privilege of considering even when I could not enjoy them.

Now, however, and all at once, I am no longer an alien in her eyes. She has taken me altogether over to her side. Indeed, she insists that I remain with her, united in everything. For my cousin Susanna has of late begun to feel the encroachments of middle age, and she has already perceived that no previous conditions either of marriage or of

spinsterhood will now avail the woman anything; that alike on us all, without distinction of place, without respect of person, middle age showers whatsoever indignities and surprises it will, on the wife and on the spinster.

It is pathetic to see her helplessness over the situation, and yet her revolt. She asks me if I mean to submit or to stand up against it all. She appeals to me, wanting to know what I think about belts—whether by pulling a belt up or down a better line is given to the figure; and she will let me struggle over hers for an hour while she remains as meek as any child. Only the other day it was about black tulle or velvet for the neck, because somehow, as she said, nothing “went” the same way as it used to, and she did not want Harry to notice. Then she came to

consult me about her hair, which had grown too thin over the temples to be curled, and she asked me how I managed about mine. Mine! My hair, indeed, that every one tells me is quite as thick as it ever was! But Susanna leaves me out of nothing on these days, especially the unbecoming symptoms.

She insists upon keeping the door shut when she talks, and she preserves such an air of mystery that one might easily suppose we were girls again and exchanging confidences about valentines. She would not for the world, she tells me, have her children know that she cared, or that she ever discussed such subjects; and with the thought of her children she suddenly assumes a different manner, telling me how undignified the whole question is. But I notice that she always returns to it.

She is always arriving at my corner with remedies for this trouble or that, generally a trouble that has something to do with an increasing avoirdupois or a growing shortness of waist. It is the waist that troubles her most. Sometimes it will be to bring me a prescription or a regimen which has been followed by some pretty woman whose figure is still that of a girl, even with a son at Yale—so much lemon-juice, Susanna informs me, to be taken so many times a day, and hot water after one's meals. And then it is not lemon-juice or hot water at all, only the going-without-your-breakfast plan. But it is always some other plan. None of them seems to work, which makes me sorry for my cousin, for I can remember when men who saw her in evening dress used to say that they knew at last

who had stolen the lost arms of the Venus of Melos.

She displays the greatest solicitude for me and my condition, as though in all that concerned her I was to be included, which is kind, since I am younger, as every one knows who sees us together. She is always observing me. One day she saw me look in the glass as we were going up a hotel elevator. I was dissatisfied with the fit of my collar, but she thought I was engaged with my chin. "Don't mind," she said sympathetically, laying her hand on my arm. "I remember just how I felt when I first discovered mine. Nothing that happens to a woman is so bad as that which happens to her chin after forty."

When I reached home that night I took a mirror and went to a strong light to see if she could be right;

for old friends are so observant, and Susanna is like a sea-captain, with eyes always alert for weather signs: she lets nothing escape her. I shall not, of course, tell her what I saw in the glass!

But her solicitude embarrasses me, she takes such trouble on my account, like pointing out a rather pretty and well-dressed woman on the street, for instance, whose waistband has never been altered as she has grown stouter, and whose shoulders, in consequence, have been lifted until they form nearly a straight line across. "There," said Susanna. "Now you know why I am so interested in *your* clothes."

I know, of course, that it is very kind of my cousin, but she perplexes me. She has referred so constantly of late to the subject of my age and the "little things" that she has

noticed that not long since I began to notice things for myself, and I drew her attention to a new bunch of wrinkles that I thought might be coming under my eyes, there where the cheek-bone makes a slight descent. I made my reference to them in a gay and light-hearted manner, because she has some wrinkles of her own in that very spot, and I did not want her to suppose that I thought them anything but delightful. Indeed, I am rather fond of wrinkles myself. I would not lose one from the faces of those whom I love—this wrinkle that a kind thought has tracked across the brow, this line about the mouth that some resolve has deepened, nor those records around the eyes of smiles that have never failed me in encouragement.

It may be that with the “coming

of the crow's-feet " there must follow the " backward turn to beaux' feet "; but who minds the feet that turn backward, if ahead there is always a hand held out to you, and you know, besides, that you have a corner to which you are welcomed, and another to which you may invite? So I do not find the subject so dreadful. I take, indeed, quite a cheerful view of wrinkles, since not until they appear does any spinster feel sure of an old maid's corner awaiting her. But Susanna, that day when I referred to those just appearing on my cheek, turned on me suddenly and said: " You ought to make up your mind from this time forth never again to refer to what is inevitable and sad. Whenever you are tempted to do so, remember this story of Mrs. Randolph, the most beautiful woman in

America, as you know, even after her sons were quite grown. When she detected her first wrinkles,—and they were those fine wrinkles for which there is no hope, and which cover all of the face,—she determined neither to refer to them herself nor to allow any one to approach her on the subject. She never mentioned the question of age from that day until the day of her death. She bore them as we all must bear great calamities—in silence; and the world respected her dignity.”

This speech affected me much at the time, it was uttered with such convincing earnestness; but afterward I wondered whether my cousin’s admonitions were not addressed to herself. People have a way of doing such things. I always knew as a child just when a young uncle had overdrawn his account. He never

failed to lecture me about getting into debt, even though he knew that I had not a penny of my own to spend.

On another occasion Susanna told me again the story of Mme. Récamier's knowing when her beauty had begun to fade because no one in the street any longer turned to look at her as she passed. "I am only beginning," Susanna said to me, "to know the full tragedy of what she must have felt." In return I told her the story of a spinster I knew who realized when youth and graces had begun to depart because one day she found she could sit in the park alone, a kind-hearted policeman even having come up to suggest some bench a little more protected from the wind. But Susanna saw no parallel; she only wondered why the men of the spinster's family let her

go to the park alone—Harry had never permitted her to go. I suggested that there were no men in that particular old maid's family to care, but that did not alter Susanna's opinion. Nothing ever alters that.

Sometimes, for Susanna's benefit, I take a cheerful view of middle age and insist upon talking of its advantages, which, indeed, are many and most delightful, when one but considers them. I tell her that I like to be middle-aged, preferring that condition to youth, and I dwell upon the fact of how free and untrammelled it makes us; how it gives us a chance to be ourselves at last, to express our own opinions and our purposes, undeterred by fear of the ignorant interpretations of little minds; that by the time we have reached middle age we have made

our records, and the things that we say and do are not measured by alarms for our development, but by the standards according to which men have seen us govern our lives. Then I refer to the fact that we can say and do things never possible in youth, and I tell her how much my sympathies go out to the young girls who express some feeling, only to have it misunderstood. Now and then I talk to Susanna after this fashion:

“Here am I a middle-aged spinster, and now when I like any one or am sorry for any one, even for a young man, and I want to tell him so, I can tell him without his taking fright. That is a thing I could never do as a younger woman, although I used to feel in exactly the same way and mean no more than I mean now.” But this view of

content with one's self, or with one's place in life. Discontent with one's children. Discontent without them. Discontent with your husband because he has not proved himself what you supposed him. Discontent with a wife because she has not kept pace with your own developments. For nobody escapes the shoals, Susanna, nor the danger-places. The middle-aged men are no safer than the middle-aged women, my dear. Second childhood is ahead of us all by that time, and the discipline of our nursery days is to be repeated, which made no distinction in favor of either the boy or the girl children. And so for the middle-aged men, as for us, there are the same temptations to confront—those of melancholy; of thinking that nothing is of any more use; of being sure that one is left out of the race or behind in the

procession, or that one is misunderstood. And then there are the loss of hope and the loss of courage, grievous temptations these, in which faith and evidence go wrestling. Then there are the settled habits about being too sick to make any effort. And there is vanity. Oh, yes; vanity, Susanna—the vanity which makes us think that people are talking against us, which is as bad as the vanity which makes us think that they are always approving. Then the being sure that the world is worse than when we grew up, and that our ways of thinking are the only right ways. Then the wanting other people to give their convictions up to ours, and our never wanting to yield a single opinion to them. And oh, I forgot! There are the evil associations which we choose as our daily companions—the suspicions,

disappointments, and resentments. Then the blaming other people for our mistakes, and thinking that a God-given quality like virtue any one living can take from the soul of another. But worse than all, there is the being so virtuous ourselves that we make every one else with whom we talk feel wicked."

By this time I am talking to myself, for I know no such persistent temptation for the middle-aged, none so subtle in its nature nor so disastrous in its consequences, as that which makes us like to seem to our juniors not only established in altogether virtuous ways, but as if we had been so established all our lives. It is not, I think, a very courageous attitude to take, especially before the young, who have no means of knowing what rapids we, their elders, have encountered when

there are never any attics with their treasure-trove of old hair trunks to delve among; and yet the instinct to delve into something is as strong. It belongs preëminently to women, I think. Some of those whom I know will take such a day for an upheaval of closets, some for bureau drawers. Some will use one for going through a desk, or through a wardrobe with its laces. Some who are spinsters, like me, will take it, as girls often do, for sorting out and arranging their different souvenirs. Every old maid's corner is full of them—curious mementos and keepsakes that have lain there for years: pictures of faithful lovers; stories of people with names left off; hints of a tragedy dropped by several people, and which, all at once, as we look them over, we suddenly find fitting together. And tucked

person to make the young stumbler feel himself a sinner.

Susanna, however, has failed to perceive that my last words were addressed to myself. She has her back toward me as I finish. I feel some overture my duty. I go to her, turn her around so that she faces me, wrinkles and all, and then I say quite gravely, feeling every word:

“There is another thing that I have forgotten to say about middle age. It is the best thing of all, and can comfort us both. If we let our prejudices fall away, and all our little self-esteems, we can grow as much into wisdom when we are middle-aged as we grew into knowledge when we were young. And there is this which neither of us must forget—no growing is ever so beautiful as the growing of the old.”

Then Susanna kissed me. She

never feels quite so near me as when I am pointing out the hopes of middle age.

Poor Susanna! It must be a tragedy—this having been beautiful in one's youth!



VII

OUT OF MY PORTFOLIO

HOW it rains! The streets are running rivers, and the torrents that fall from leaden skies divide each man from his fellows and shut us all indoors.

At home, on a day like this, it was our delight, when young, to go into the attic, that we might delve there among the treasures of some horsehair trunks and some of red

deerskin that had stood under the cobwebbed rafters for nobody knew how long.

What accumulations they held! The jetsam and flotsam of many a gay transport that had once borne beauties long since dead and beaus of another fashion out on to seas of glory, and sometimes on to reefs, alas! We would come across white satin wedding-slippers without heels, and high-crowned hats with uncurled plumes, satin waistcoats, knee-buckles studded with brilliants, and fans with pictures after famous French painters. Sometimes, folded away with a knot of golden hair or a faded rose, there would be a pair of tiny blue kid shoes, with the date of the baby's death in faded ink. Once we found one of its muslin caps, and used it for our dolls; but we were only children then.

Deep down at the very bottom of some trunk there would be such queer silhouettes and miniatures—pictures of women, their hair all puffs, and men with high white stocks and dog-eared collars. And what letters—yellow-stained and faint with age, but still breathing of past joys and past despairs! Nobody's letters, when we found them, the very names of their writers forgotten, but each showing a heart wide open for the instant, giving up glimpses of innermost chambers, and then, with all their other history, fading away into the past again, like those glimpses that we catch through open doorways or over garden walls, which fade behind us just as we have caught them through the windows of a railway-train that whirls us by.

But in a town on a rainy day

there are never any attics with their treasure-trove of old hair trunks to delve among; and yet the instinct to delve into something is as strong. It belongs preëminently to women, I think. Some of those whom I know will take such a day for an upheaval of closets, some for bureau drawers. Some will use one for going through a desk, or through a wardrobe with its laces. Some who are spinsters, like me, will take it, as girls often do, for sorting out and arranging their different souvenirs. Every old maid's corner is full of them—curious mementos and keepsakes that have lain there for years: pictures of faithful lovers; stories of people with names left off; hints of a tragedy dropped by several people, and which, all at once, as we look them over, we suddenly find fitting together. And tucked

away among this driftwood out of others' lives how many of our own half-forgotten possessions we discover: ambitions and purposes long since abandoned as out-of-date; plans of kind deeds which we meant to perform, but for which there was never a convenient moment. Then, the thoughts that were to be our daily companions, but which we were always too busy to take counsel with. What an assortment! Every old spinster has them, I say. They often prove posthumous records.

I like to go over mine when a rainy day comes. Then I spread before me a huge portfolio, between the ample pages of which I have slipped various odds and ends. Here, for instance, is a little thing, a mere fragment that I have had for years. A dear old lady whom I love gave it to me. She wanted

me to use it, but I never have. Where, indeed, could such a fragment fit, unless, like a scrap of tapestry, it could be framed by itself. It tells but little of the story except that they were young. She was of our own people and beautiful. He, too, was young, and had that splendor of bearing and that nobility of mien which seem to make worth while even the giving up one's country to possess. They were married, and he, being Prussian,—for everything was Prussian then,—was in the army. After that the war with France broke out. This was in the seventies of the century that has gone. When his orders came, he made a galloping detour one night at the head of his cavalry troop, and, riding up the stone-paved street of the little town where he had left his wife, he stopped before her door.

She was up-stairs in a room filled with shaded candle-light, their eight-day-old baby, which he had never seen, nestled under her arm. He stooped and kissed the mother, and then, with the ardor of a boy, he lifted his first-born, his son, and running with him down the stairs, mounted his horse, and held the baby up before his troop. High over his head he held the child, and each man in the long line of horsemen trailing down the dimly lighted street broke into a cheer. When this baptism into loyalty was over, the young father ran up-stairs again,—he had but the moment,—and laying the little fellow by his mother, told her, with another kiss, how soon he would come back—very, very soon, next week perhaps. When he left she could hear the hoofs of the horses clattering over the stones, he at their

head, galloping off into the night—off still farther to where a battle was to be fought next day. Straight into the cannon's mouth he rode, they told her afterward, and so saved the day; but even his body was not to be found when the battle was done.

No; there is nothing else with which this fragment could fit, unless I knew what became of that baby. Did she, being but a woman, and all alone, know how to make him such a man as his father would have had him? Sometimes I wonder if, from very dread of courage and its cost, she kept the lad a weakling all his life. Not to every mother is given the power so to rear her son that, Theseus-like, he may step into the sandals an heroic father has bequeathed.

Next in my portfolio I come

across a picture at which I always like to look. It is a picture of two lovers, not young, however, like those we oftenest see. These had been married for forty years, and their anniversary fell on her sixtieth birthday. Her hair, which had been golden and full of curls, had never turned gray. There was still in it a suggestion of the gay abandon of its youth, as there was in the joy one read in her face. The hair had only grown to be a darker shade, as the hair of blondes should grow. To him who loved her this was still a halo round her head. If she were older than when they were married, I doubt whether he had ever stopped to think. But she had. For fifteen years at least she had been taking note of changes in herself, having her tea-gowns cut higher and higher in the neck, so that he would not

see what she mourned, until now the collars bound her close about the throat. Then, being a man, he did see at last, but without understanding, for he asked her if she would not dress again as she used to dress for dinner. This was just before their fortieth anniversary, which came on a Sunday. When he was taking his afternoon nap she arrayed herself. And how pretty she was! I saw her afterward—that very night, indeed—in her black velvet gown cut square at the throat, a bit of old Venetian lace turned back over the shoulders, and some soft tulle across the bust. I saw her, as I say; but her husband, to whom the dress was to be a surprise, saw her first. While he slept she crept into his room, and taking a chair, drew it up beside the sofa where he lay, seating herself with

folded hands. And there, smiling, she waited, without moving, until he waked and saw her and the gown. Sometimes it seems to me that no picture of young lovers was ever half so sweet.

And here is still another picture, sent me by some friend. The man and woman in it are old—very old indeed; and he wears knee-breeches, and big buttons on his coat. You cannot see his face, but from the way in which one thin hand falls over the arm of the chair and his feet are placed upon the floor, you know him to have been a gentleman all his life. He sits beside a big four-post bedstead in the twilight, and on its pillow, in a lace cap, there is the face of a woman. You can see hers clearly, and how old and white and very still it is. The man holds the woman's hand. He has

always held it in this way of late when in the afternoon she slept, because he has never let her know what it was to be without his hand, as they walked together in their youth, through all the middle years, and into age. But this afternoon, though his grasp had been as close, he had felt her going, and without him—beginning that long journey upon which we must all set out alone. He did not summon any help, expecting to follow himself in a little while,—who knows?—for they had always been so near in all they did. It was only after many hours, when night had come, that the great-grandchildren opened the door, worried by a silence that had lasted longer than its wont. When they looked at her and spoke to him, he only lifted his head to say:

“Yes, I know; but I wanted to

hold her hand and be alone with her for just a little longer.”

I find that I have a great many of these pictures of old lovers put away, gathered together because I like them, but put away because they would not interest young people. Love, to them, is all a thing of youth, and wide horizons, and sparkling summer skies of dazzling glory. They think that when age comes the fires must have burned out in the heart, leaving nothing but a bed of ashes. But how can the flames ever be out, I say, so long as one face can be lighted by the joy of looking into the face of the other?

But this! My favorite title,—
“One of the Gift-Bearers,”—and tucked away here among all these half-forgotten things! I cared for

it at one time more than for anything that I had—this title of a story that I meant to write. Everybody has one, but mine was inspired by the illumined look that I once caught on the face of a woman wearing a widow's cap who passed me hurriedly in the street. It was full of such radiance that it haunted me for days, and I asked her history. She was to be "One of the Gift-Bearers" in my story, since love with her was always the gift that she bore, not that which she prided herself on receiving. I gathered as much from all that her friends told me from time to time, she in her own eyes being only such a bearer as a king would choose to send his message by—the casket, perhaps, in which the gem was sent, but never the jewel itself. Nothing in her life showed that she confused

the two, or that she claimed for herself as bearer that which belonged only to the gift she carried. And as she proved this in the love she gave her husband (it was all for him), so she felt it about the sons she bore. They were gifts to her, and from her, too. She never murmured when they both perished as heroes, their names on all our lips, during the war with Spain. In those days when I was thinking altogether of her, and never went anywhere without carrying my title with me, I used to wonder why every other woman could not be a Gift-Bearer as well, like this one with the radiant face. And I knew that every other woman might be, whatever her place in life, whether she were given a child to rear, a book to write, a house to put in order, or only a cheerful hint to carry

to some stumbler. For to be a Gift-Bearer, like this one who had passed me in her widow's cap, it needs only that one be willing to remember that the bearer is not the gift, and that one should think more and more of the gift one carries, and what that gift means, and less and less of one's self who had been chosen to bear it.

I found the theme too big for me. I might have caught and given the tragic notes of the woman's story, for every one knows the notes of tragedy. But her radiance! One must have the fires one's self to give radiance, to know that the highest giving is being—as one must be all poet to be lyrical in song. I know now that I shall never write "One of the Gift-Bearers," although I meant to have made that story my best.

Next to this title, as I turn the page, I come upon two emblazoned paragraphs like those painted texts it was once the fashion to hang over our beds. One text reads: "The perfect balance in life is found by supplying deficiencies in others. They never find it who are only on the lookout for perfect equalities." The other runs: "Those who are forever seeking others whose moods will exactly match their own will find it safer to carry their own moods with them."

I know just how these two found their way here, the very day and hour, in fact, of their coming. He, as men sometimes will, had lifted his hands over his head and cried out in an agony of despair. The soul of another had failed him: that great nature in which at first he had seemed to find his other self, all

his hopes, his aspirations, his great and lofty purposes matched with equal ardor—a nature that, in the great enthusiasm of his young affections, he thought so deep because, like the shallow basin of a fountain, it could reflect whatever of greatness was spread over it, even that of the blue vaults on high. Beautiful and alluring mirrors, these shallow basins, as I know. No wonder he was deceived. Beautiful mirrors in which we who look can read the very secrets of the stars brought down within our reach, but against which we only break our heads and hearts when we try to plunge into them.

I think, being like every other spinster with an explanation and a remedy for every woe, that I tried to tell him something of this, insisting that, after all, it was *she* who

might have been defrauded, he having failed to come to her as he had done before their marriage, bringing the same enthusiasms with him; and I suggested that if he brought just as much to her now he might find just as much reflected as he had seen at first! For he was not the only man I had known who, entranced by seeing only his own image filling another's soul, has sometimes, when he tried to see another and a deeper in its stead, been pained by as rude an awakening. It is safer to be a Gift-Bearer, I think, than to be too greatly concerned with what other people fail in.

“That which wins a man will wean him.” I have not thought of this for years, nor do I remember why I thought of it then. It might have gone at the end of those other

texts I just had in my hands. I will pin it to them when I put it back, as I mean to put everything in a moment, now that the clouds outside are lifting. Perhaps I ought to destroy it. I would send it to a woman whom I know, except for its hopelessness, and nothing that has hopelessness in it ought to live or be sent about among one's friends. Besides, would it help her? Her husband is long since weaned, and by that very devotion of hers to children which had won him to her in his youth. Before they were married, he found it alluring to watch her caring for her sister's children, neglecting her own pleasures for them. He thought he had never seen so lovely a girl, nor one with so few frivolities—just the woman he wanted as his wife. But when their own babies came, and she was

no less devoted to them, carrying them in her own arms rather than let a nurse have them, her devotion took on a different color in his eyes. For her back rounded under the strain, her figure was ruined, and none of her clothes fitted, which worried him. "Why don't Betty's dresses look like yours?" he once said to a younger sister of hers, a girl who never permitted anything to interfere with the perfection of her toilets. Now, when the wife is in the nursery, he goes out of the house, twitching his shoulders with impatience. Yet this wife is exactly the same person he married, loving the same things which he loved her for loving in those days when he persisted in believing that she was the only woman in the world for him.

There, indeed, is the hopelessness

of it all: "That which wins a man will wean him." The butterfly nature before marriage and the butterfly nature afterward. Altruistic tendencies in the maiden and altruistic sympathies in the wife. I wish I had not found it here to-day. It is like our coming across those tiny blue kid shoes with the date of the baby's death that we used to see in the old trunks long ago, bringing us back with a sudden shock to knowing how even the sweetest of dreams may end. Yes, the hopelessness of it all! But why the hopelessness, I ask myself, even as I still hold the hopeless sentence in my hands. Of course there is a vulnerable spot in all earthly happiness, else it would not be earthly. But I have never believed that it was meant that we were to prepare only for destruction coming to us

through our vulnerable places. I believe that our weaknesses are our opportunities, and our vulnerable spots are often made irritating simply to show us in what quarter our recuperative energies might be directed to most profit.

Sometimes I go even farther than this, and believe that our greatest temptations lie along the line of our greatest strength, and not along the line of our greatest frailty. It all depends upon our point of view whether we regard temptations as sent by malignant powers to assail us, or ourselves as sent out by a righteous power to meet them. There is a thought of valor included in the last idea, and of hopefulness in the possibility it suggests of our developing in stature and girth, like the soldiers whom we train to meet a danger. But per-

haps there is too little of comfort in it for most people. Growing pains are an affliction when they once begin. Then, too, there are some of us to whom the whole question is confusing, as it must be to that poor friend of mine who clings so persistently to the one supreme virtue by which her husband was won. What more natural for her than to cherish that which he had loved? It was he who taught her the value of that which he now spurns.

Certainly it seems to me that if we did understand more clearly what it was to grow, we would at least understand something of the principles of adjustment and of readjustment, and what the constant, unending need of adjustments is among people to whom growth is not natural—not an unfoldment, as it should be, with the outworn drop-

ping away, as petals from seeds. For if the power of adjustment were acquired, there never would be any insanity or madness. Unhappiness would endure but as a momentary shock, and every conflicting current in married life would be but a blending to make the great streams stronger.

It may be, when the necessities for readjustment arise, that we are all thinking too much of what we were and too little of what we want to be. The disappointed married ones, like the faded beauties, seldom, I know, think of anything else. That is why most of them remain so closely tied to their miseries, never far enough away to look them in the face. I know one exception. "We are growing old," this one said to her husband. "Do not let us settle into ways, thinking nothing so im-

portant as our symptoms and nothing worth cultivating but our own peculiarities. Since we have to be old people, let us be nice and agreeable old people, the very nicest whom we know." And how enchanting they became, in fact, everybody's children loving them! They had none of their own.

This is the woman who once said to me: "If we would all regard the marriages we entered into as we would our professions, bending all our energies to making a success of ours, there would be fewer failures in domestic life."

I am glad that I thought of her to-day, for I like things to end cheerfully, especially old age, and more particularly marriages. And I know nothing better able to insure a cheerful ending than that idea of growth which keeps us always to

the inner truth of things, so that the ugly and uncomfortable fall away of themselves, and the new and the beautiful are welcomed as an unfoldment. For I think of what the love of the man and woman might mean who understood it, even the love of such a hopeless one as she whose husband is now weaned by that which had won him: how the ideal would carry them on together through the very eternities, lovers always and to the end, like those at whose pictures I looked first to-day, and which I now lay away in my portfolio.

Yes, I like things to end cheerfully, and most assuredly a rainy day like this one. The sun is shining, and everywhere outside there is the freshness of an atmosphere washed clear of dust. The streets

are filling with people, for men and women who live in town are like robins after a storm: each quits his cover on the instant, and the ground is covered with a moving throng.



VIII

THE REAL SPRINGTIME FOR ME

IN the early summer, when the wind plays in the only tree that I can see from my southern windows, the sound is that of pattering rain; for each crisp young leaf, rising on the billows of the wind, is then lifted from below and taps gaily on the back of one of its fellows, as the rain of summer,

when it falls, taps them on their bright young faces. At no other time of the year do I hear this particular sound from that tree. In the autumn, after the first frost has touched it, the noise of the wind in the tree is of rattling papers. All the dry leaves then shiver convulsively together, and those that are dislodged scrape a last sad, noisy way past all their old companions, with whom they are to be united again only when for one brief hour they strew a little circle on the asphalt below. Nothing could exceed in desolation the mournful tone of these leaves, bewailing in dry, cracked voices the end of their own delights. No dozen trees, were there happily a dozen near my corner, could so impress me. A solitary tree on a city block, with half-dead foliage shivering in the wind, is like

a single baby crying when the nights are still and the windows open. If you live on the same block, you can hear nothing else.

For all that, when my single neighbor of a tree begins to assume this mournful tone—a tone about which I am now as philosophic as we all become whenever the constantly repeated griefs of our neighbors are concerned—I grow suddenly glad: autumn has come to my corner.

And autumn on my corner is one of the most delightful of all seasons, for my rubber-tree comes home from the florist's, the cheeks of its young leaves as rosy as sprigs of red coral. My palms come back, and my ferns arrive with hundreds of new shoots to show me. My brasses, too, emerge from their summer wrappings, my curtains show a pristine freshness, and all my old

companions of silk cushions, when rearranged about my room, look as if the summer had made them over. Autumn is the spring of the year to me, indeed, who live my days in town.

My friends begin then to come home from the country with their cheeks rosy too and their faces shining with the pleasure of new purposes. The very air that floats in at my windows has a sparkle in it that I cannot resist, and each cloud that I see sailing across the deep blue of the sky might be my ship coming in at last, so full of glorious import does it seem.

With the coming of autumn, too, comes the charm of early twilights, which I never shut out with drawn curtains. For then, after the sun is gone and the color has all faded out of the dark wood-green of my

background, I see on every brass candlestick and hanging lamp, on every polished Dutch milk-can and Russian pot, and even on my tongs and shovel, myriads of tiny specks of light beginning to appear, that, as the darkness grows, will gleam like stars until the very room is filled and a new and indescribable loveliness is added to my apartment. My brasses never mean so much to me as at this time. They are like friends whom I know, who hold a sweet remembrance in the heart for the coming of an hour that may be dark on my corner. For it is as though the brasses had absorbed into themselves part of the sunshine that had caressed them all day, that had played and danced and frolicked over their surfaces—sunshine which “by and by black night doth take away,” and all is sealed in rest.

My married cousin Susanna also returns to town in the autumn, bringing, as is her invariable custom, a hundred new plans for rearranging my life. She has never, in fact, come back from a summer without them, and, curiously enough, the more contented she finds me, and the brighter and more cheerful my corner, the more valuable to her seem these plans for my upheaval. Sometimes I have fancied that it worried her to find me happy. It left her in such doubt about the condition of my mind. She is always, at any rate, proposing that I move somewhere else—into her house, into that of her melancholy sister, that I take charge of some charitable institution; for there is not a plan which she has suggested until now that has not had to do with the giving up of my corner, as

in his throat, but they are as non-committal in character as the politeness of certain people who have condescended to pause at our approach: it never commits them to anything, and we can translate it just as our vanity prompts. I suppose that my cousin calls this laughter, but I would not, for the lids of his near-sighted eyes are not even drawn together behind his glasses. Real laughter ought never to be over in a moment, without a ripple following. Then, again, Harry takes up his book the very moment you have ceased speaking. When I think of this man, and of what it must have been to one of my cousin's ardent temperament to work faithfully for twenty-five years, as she has done, without being able to get a single spontaneous expression out of him, somehow or other I think that there

must be harder things to bear than even having to be a spinster. I understand then, too, why Susanna is so restless, forever beating against that same adamantine rock of a phlegmatic husband's unresponsive nature, and she so pretty, too, when she began. Even a wave will turn in new directions when a way is opened, and my cousin, being an honest woman, turns all her energies in mine. I have learned not to mind it since I began to understand what a relief even an old maid must be after Harry. At least, she knows that I will answer her when she speaks.

When Susanna arrived on my corner this autumn, however, although she brought new plans for me, as was her wont, they differed materially from those of other years. This time, for instance, she

does not want me to move out of my corner with my books and my brasses, because she wants to have some old and forlorn people of her acquaintance to come and share my sunshine. She tells me that these old people will give me such an interest in life. When I parry this attack, she is ready with another—my having certain children to train. They would bring so much to my corner, as she says; and then my books would be such an advantage to them. She saw the very children, in fact, at a summer hotel, and began to discuss the subject with their irresponsible mother. Again, as to-day, I escape with some excuse, and this time she goes to my windows, where my birds are singing on their rubber-tree, and says that she thinks cats so much better adapted to spinsters.

I have made a great mistake, I fear, in not keeping a list of my cousin's suggestions. But then where is the spinster without a cousin Susanna of her own? I believe that if I walked across the street now and asked any other old maid whose rooms I can see from my southern windows,—any other old maid, I mean, who has made herself *perfectly comfortable*,—she would supply me with a duplicate list made by some interested or devoted or restless or energetic or disappointed friend of her own. For there is that about us who are the old maids (I have never divined exactly what it is) that inspires in the minds of most of our acquaintances (not of all, to their glory be it said) a desire to manage us as Susanna wants to manage me. Every one would have a hand at us.

It may be because most people think that, being spinsters, we are unfortunate, and the unfortunate, as well as the poor, I discover, must submit to many managements, else where would be the joy of most charities? It is certainly because we are without husbands. A man in the house serves to keep off many approaches.

Susanna's second grandchild has arrived. The eldest is only eighteen months old, and the little mother but twenty-three. Susanna tells me how sad she thinks it is—so many children and so much care. She cannot say enough about it as she stands looking at my birds.

“But I think that it is lovely,” I exclaim at last, in a cheerful tone. Sometimes her tone of depression makes mine more cheerful than its wont. “But I think it is lovely,” I repeat—“all young together, all

growing up together, father, mother, and all. What an enchanting family they will make in half a dozen years! Children, too, adore young fathers. Think how they will adore your son-in-law!"

There is no answer from my cousin as she turns, but I know by the drawing in of the lips that there are things which she could say if she would. She goes instead to a vase of *mignonette*,—she must always be doing something when she is agitated,—and picking out several large stalks, she recrosses my room and puts the *mignonette* in among my white roses, something she is doing repeatedly, although I am sure she has heard me say a dozen times that I never like anything in with those special white roses of mine except, perhaps, some maidenhair fern. I shall take the *mignonette*

out when she goes, as I have done on every other occasion. In the meantime, as she moves about, I find it delightful to talk to her from my chair.

“Seriously, now,” I begin, “why should you not be glad about Amelia’s children, and what is the care compared with the joy of them?” (No answer from my cousin.) “Where’s the logic in your attitude?” I go on. “Were one of those little children to die, or both, would you not be tempted to cry out even against the Almighty who has sent them? Would you not look at other young mothers with little children and question with rebellious heart why your daughter alone was called upon to suffer a bereavement? And would you not look at old people, and deformed people, and people who are only burdens to

themselves, yet who linger on as cares and troubles to those about them—would n't you look at them and question Providence, asking why it was in life that those who were old and infirm should be left to us, while those who were young and beautiful should be taken away? ” (Still no answer from Susanna. She has only turned her back, and is looking out of my window.) “ And then,” I continue, for the subject has now touched upon deeps in my own convictions—“ and then, have you never thought what this attitude against the coming of children may lead to? Who knows what the next child may be, what message it may have to carry into this world? Other great leaders have still to be born to us, other discoverers, other poets, other artists, other teachers. Can't you imagine

that the attitude against the coming of children might keep some of the great ones away from our particular doors? ”

I was half inclined to believe from the expression of my cousin's shoulders, lifted in silhouette against the panes, that what I was saying had impressed her; but as she turned, when I had finished, it was only to take her gloves from the mantelpiece and to observe, as she put them on: “ You talk like a visionary, as you always do, and as if you did not know what a backache was. My daughter is not strong.”

When my cousin says “ my daughter ” to me, as she has done once or twice,—to me, her old friend, and about Amelia, whom I have carried in my arms, Amelia, whom I have helped to bring up, who is like my own child indeed,—

I give up the discussion. It is as though my cousin had not only shut a door between us, but let me hear the clicking of the key as she turned it in the lock.

There are times when this manner of Susanna's disturbs me, but not in the autumn, when everything shines on my corner and the sun of soft October days caresses all that it touches. Besides, I know very well that, whatever the nature of my cousin's exit may be, her return to my corner is sure. I think that down in the bottom of her soul she likes it—likes it, at least, when she finds me at home. When I chance to be out it disturbs her. She will refer to the subject, if need be, half a dozen times, until she is sure that she understands just why it happened that my corner was deserted. I was sure just now that she would not leave even

when I saw her gloves go on, so I did not rise from my seat. And I was right. She stopped at the door, and lifting the metal balls of the harp that hangs there, she let them fall back one by one against the strings, asking me, as she lifted them, whether I did not think that women were uncharitable and critical in what they said. Then I knew that something had been said about my cousin's new way of arranging her hair with those little soft, short curls that she purchased recently. Her own hair had become hopelessly thin on the forehead. But it was not for me to say so, though I think she is much too old for the curls.

“Not when women are left to themselves,” I said from my chair. “When they are critical about one another they are only reflecting the judgments of the men at home—of

husbands and fathers and brothers, who are always frightening the women of their families by telling them what other men say. Listen to this," I went on, tucking a cushion under my head. Then I told her of a small boy and girl I had met at a watering-place. He was eleven and precocious, being trusted with his own sail-boat and his rifle. He lived in a college town, and had caught the swagger of the freshman from one of his older brothers. She, the girl, was eight, and came from some quiet village where boys and girls played together. She wanted to play now with the young Elisha, and she used to go after him at all hours to join her in a game of tennis or croquet, and, when it rained, a game of authors on her porch. Sometimes Elisha went; sometimes, being a young man, he made his ex-

cuses. He was clearly embarrassed by her attentions. Finally he fell ill and went to bed with a cold, and she, the little girl, brought him flowers and candy. When she was not admitted to the house, she would stand under his window waiting for news of him. "Somebody ought to speak to Katharine," he said to his mother. "She's a little bit too fresh. All the boys will be laughing at her." I think he spoke to Katharine himself, for I used to see her, after this, hanging about her porch alone, a melancholy little figure, suffering from her first harsh lesson in self-consciousness before men. Elisha took to fishing every day. He was then free of her advances.

"Tell me frankly," I said to my cousin when the story was told, "has n't Harry said much the same thing to you a hundred times in

these twenty-five years? Has n't he said that he did n't want any man saying things about his wife, and that they would say them if you did what the pretty woman across the street was doing? And has n't Harry junior checked the enthusiasms of his sister as many times by saying, 'I can't have the fellows talking about you, and they will talk if they see you speaking to So-and-So'? And would n't Amelia's husband say much the same thing to her if Amelia herself were not so splendid and so fearless and so big in all her nature, teaching *him* how to be human and generous and kind, and not to judge people by their acts always, but more by their attitude toward their own acts? Laugh at us who are the spinsters," I continued, "but one reason why our corners are so comfortable is that

we reflect no one man's opinion in them."

But my cousin only continued to stand by my door, lifting those little metal balls from the harp and letting them fall back against the strings. Then suddenly she turned and went down the hall, with only a good-by tossed back at me over her shoulder.

I never, I confess, have quite the same assurance with Susanna when discussing questions of judgment in the spring; for, having then spent the winter under her eye, as it were, she has all my mistakes of the season to point to—a long list sometimes, filled with what I insist are experiments, but which she pronounces failures, as if failures were not experiments, too, proving just as many principles.

But now the winter with all its hopes is before me, and I can keep